

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SEEKING PERSONAL MEANING IN NEW PLACES:
 THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF
 RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

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This phenomenological study explores the lived experience of religious conversion. As a study concerned with the development of religious identity (often rooted in psycho-social research where identity development usually relies on linear processes of growth), this dissertation research suggests that religious identity development, in particular, cannot easily be mapped to these models. What insights about religious identity, and identity generally, can be drawn from the standpoint of religious conversion? How do people who have experienced this phenomenon make meaning of that experience? What implications does “fluid” identity hold for educational settings?

This research is done in the tradition of phenomenology drawing on the work of philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Levinas, Derrida, and Merleau-Ponty as foundational “grounding” for this study. Each of these philosophers raise key concepts used for the rendering and illumination of the phenomenon of religious conversion. Van Manen provides a detailed process by which phenomenological philosophy can be used to conduct this form of research.

Initial exploration of the existential phenomenon suggests themes including the various pressures that make hiding a change in identity necessary, a deep questioning

surrounding the nature of religion itself and the meaning it holds for people, and the rejection of certainty as a value in religious identity.

Once themes of religious conversion had been explored, I recruited ten participants representing a wide array of identities related to religion, race, sex, sexuality, gender identity, age, and educational attainment for this study. My phenomenological data suggest that religious identity development can be deeply understood as a complex phenomenon often mirrored in the mythological “heroic journey” commonly found in cultures around the world. In this process, I develop the concept of *phenomythology*, a process of weaving myth and phenomenology together as an existential process to uncover and illustrate the seemingly universal search for ultimacy and liminality in life’s *small* events as revelatory of larger significance and deeper inward meaning.

Drawing from the insights I gained from my participants, I suggest that the lived experience of religious conversion can be linked to other social science theory (such as queer theory) to better prepare educators who encounter individuals who have complex religious identity. Specifically, I explore pedagogical possibilities for including insights from religiously queer identity as a way for understanding social difference. My first concern is helping educators understand how religiously queer people might “show up” in a classroom setting. Additionally, I offer a variety of ways to use this difference as a gift of perspective to learning, including a reconceptualization of identity within the setting of intergroup dialogue as phenomenological “cohabited space” to build solidarity and alliances for progressive social action.

SEEKING PERSONAL MEANING IN NEW PLACES:
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

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DEDICATION

In dedicating this work, I recognize that I stand on the shoulders of others who have helped me reach my dream...

For Aurora, the memory of my grandmother who believed in education, loved unconditionally, and proved that angels walk among us;

For Rocío, my mother who instilled a love of social justice, sacrificed to make the impossible possible, and who shows me that love is enough;

For Dwight, my brother who can always be counted on in a pinch, steadfastly tells me the truth, and expresses love with service and a hug;

For my brothers and sisters-in-law who have always believed I could do this and cheered me along the way;

And for Joe, my loving and legally married husband. Because you carried the weight of everything else. With you, I believe all things are possible.

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CHAPTER 1

TURNING TO THE NATURE OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE: HEARING THOSE WHO HAVE HEARD A DIFFERENT CALL

Sunday, July 21, 2024. At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church. And yet, today, because I'm a coward, I let myself be initiated into that church. I let my father baptize me in all three names of that God who isn't mine anymore. My God has another name. (Butler, 1999, p. 7)

Laura Oya Olamina is a fictional, hyper-empathic teen living in a future Southern California dystopia when she utters these words in the very beginning of Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. Contained within its simple, flat language is a reality of religious transition that is incredibly complex and, at times, contradictory. Olamina is destined to write poetry and prose, peppered throughout Butler's book, that become the foundation of a new fictional religious movement called Earthseed¹. But before Olamina becomes a controversial adult prophet, she converts from being a *de facto* Baptist to becoming something that does not yet have a name. Though her experience is technically fiction, it raises real questions about the nature of religious conversion. What actually happens when someone else's God stops "being my God?" Does going through the motions of one conversion negate another private, inner conversion or vice versa? Is professing a new faith a necessary ingredient? When and how does conversion actually happen?

Religion: Push and Pull

Religion is perhaps the ultimate human paradox. We humans create it to give ourselves a comforting sense of meaning and truth, yet meaning and truth seem elusive

¹ Butler's Earthseed religion, based on the concept that "God is Change," has spawned an actual social movement following its tenets called Solseed. Information on Solseed can be found at <www.solseed.org/Solseed>.

when the chorus of voices that proclaim to have them defines these two concepts in a uniquely different way. Across the globe, religions and humanistic philosophies espouse the virtues of peace, kindness, charity, service, and unity, yet history paints a bleak picture of how these religious practices are actualized. Do religions destroy everything they touch? What is the net gain? In religion, we innately seek structure, predictability, and habit, yet we also decry these states as boring and confining. We are intrigued by conversations about religion, but we are terrified about actually *engaging* in that conversation. When it comes to religion, we want it and we do not want it at the same time. Love and peace, murder and mayhem. Like our own inconsistent natures, religion seems to be a mirror through which we express our deepest hopes and aspirations that reside, side-by-side, with our deepest fears and uncertainties. With this constant tug-of-war, why do we even engage in the internal conversation? And what happens when someone emerges from that conversation, particularly if they choose to believe something else... something new?

Conversion Seeks Meaning

Most of us grow up in settings where some religious or quasi-religious discourse takes place to answer those pesky *why* questions. Though Olamina's false baptism (above) asks me to leave room for doubt in what I see as professed religious belief, I suspect that many people are comfortable with the answers they are given early on to their earliest *why* questions. And yet some are not satisfied with those answers and seek new, more satisfying, answers to questions that will not easily go away.

To answer deep questions of meaning, other religions or faith experiences offer perspectives, beliefs, and practices that invite a reconsideration of metaphysical "facts."

But each also offers entry into a community of fellow believers who share this particular worldview. But which religion is right? Given the various options, does a desire for new answers become satisfied through new practices or new communities? Does my particular *why* question predispose me to a particular religious path or tradition? What happens inside of me that leads me to a new particular religious place? Though it is easy to oversimplify all religions, there are certain traits that can be gleaned from several of the various world traditions.

For those who seek a flexible worldview and practice where God, the universe, and all sentient beings are ultimately one, Paul Hiebert (1992) describes Hinduism and Buddhism as attractive worldview conversion possibilities, because of their overarching emphasis on personal enlightenment. Of Hinduism, he says:

Hinduism does affirm one goal. We are to seek purer forms of worship and higher revelations until we come to full enlightenment. Then we realize that we indeed are gods and God. We are all part of the oneness that is reality. Given this worldview, Western definitions of “conversion” are rejected... Given the Hindu worldview that all roads lead to *moksha* [realization of the purpose of each individual], conversion for the individual means entering a course of action—a way of life. (pp. 12-13)

And though there are important differences in belief between Hinduism and Buddhism (and among Theravada, Mahayana, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism), Hiebert (1992) echoes the focus on personal enlightenment through a change in worldview:

For most people, conversion to Buddhism is a matter of practicing devotions privately in the home or in the company of other like-minded householders. These practices are often mixed with other beliefs and practices such as ancestor veneration, Taoism, and *tantrism*. (p. 20)

And for those who seek more definitive answers about the existence and nature of God, the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) offer competing visions of what conversion entails. In Judaism, conversion has been typically understood in terms of a return to the fold of G-d's covenant with the Hebrew people, primarily "focused on the word *sûbh*: 'to turn, return'" (Glasser, 1992, p. 57) with a sense that one will "arrive again at the initial point of departure" (Holladay, 1958, p. 53). This process implies that conversion is defined as a behavior change among a people already defined as Jewish and who share a belief about the existential nature of their monotheistic G-d, simply a change of heart.

Though Islam and Christianity spring from Judaism's roots, their view of conversion can be quite different from Judaism's inward view. Though Arabic lacks a specific word for conversion per se, the most common term is *saba'a*. Woodberry (1992) explains its rather forceful meaning in the creation of real boundaries between people:

The tribal leaders in Mecca described what Muhammad was doing as *saba'a* (to convert, change religion, become a Sabian), using the term which indicates one who thereby *becomes an enemy of his people*. With their religious observances involving the *Ka'ba*, pilgrimages, and sacred months—and consequently aiding commerce—any changes were seen as being against Muhammad's own people. [emphasis added] (p. 26)

Unlike Judaism's gentle, (mostly) inward conversion, Islam's conversion implies the potential for conflict and disagreement, to the point where one is newly considered an "enemy." While Islam clearly has an internal focus on the conversion experience, its primary word for it implies a real emphasis on its external effects.

Christianity focuses on two experiences of conversion that appear to encompass both senses of conversion implied in Judaism and Islam, for the self and for others.

Being “born again” is an inward acceptance of Jesus Christ as a unique path to salvation (and the accompanying concrete worldview it implies) where there is a distinct right and wrong way to believe. And this inner conversion implies the necessary witnessing to non-Christians where an “enemy” status is willingly taken on against other religions and the natural world implied within them (Wuthnow, 2007).

Yet all of these expressions of conversion converge in their various forms to certain principles. James (1902) summarizes essential conversion narratives as follows:

To say that a man is “converted” means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy. (p. 193)

There is thus a conscious and voluntary way and an involuntary and unconscious way in which mental results may get accomplished; and we find both ways exemplified in the history of conversion, giving us two types, which Starbuck calls the volitional type and the type by self-surrender respectively. In the volitional type, the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits... Even in the most voluntarily built-up sort of regeneration there are passages of partial self-surrender interposed; and in the great majority of all cases, when the will had done its uttermost towards bringing one close to the complete unification aspired after, it seems that the very last step must be left to other forces and performed without the help of its activity. (pp. 202-204)

James suggests that these two directions of conversion can be found as bedrock principles in narratives across many types of religious perspectives and can be understood as foundational in a becoming process an individual undertakes. But what are the inner and outer forces that shape and influence these internal processes and external effects?

My interest in these influential forces on conversion stem from my own experience of conversion (which is admittedly meandering and complicated) and the

result of my experiences as an educator where I lead intergroup dialogue, often with students who also have had profound religious conversion experiences. These students often express religion as having a “central place” (using James’ language) in being oriented to learn about other people or refraining from doing so. In short, there is a profound educational impact of religious conversion that I believe merits exploration and deep description.

Starting with Religion as the Natural Now

I recall Eckert Tolle (2004) saying that he had the privilege of living with three Zen Masters for long periods of his life. After lengthy discussion about how these Masters taught him to simply *be* in his body and in the world, Tolle reveals, in a perfectly deadpan way, that they were all cats. “Ah... I get it,” I thought to myself. Unconcerned, unaffected, and unperturbed, these cats drink in their reality with fluid grace and ease. And they do this *naturally*, as though they were hard wired to be this way. Why is it so hard for me to do the same? Am I hard wired differently? Are humans so physically different from other animals that we cannot experience the Divine in the same way? Does my ability to think and conceptualize make it harder for me to *sense* the Divine, so that I have to *think* about it instead? I marvel at the ability animals have to live their lives without entering into a war over the nature of religious truth, and I marvel that we *still* cannot seem to avoid it.

In keeping with his understandings of a sensory, animistic language, Abram (1996) suggests that this struggle to simply *be* in the world (in a way completely different from other animals) is rendered impossible by our ability to think, speak, and create abstraction. He states, “In the Hebrew Genesis, the animals do not speak their own

names to Adam; rather, they are *given* their names by this first man. Language, for the Hebrews, was becoming a purely human gift, a human power” (p. 101). Perhaps it is our ability to create abstractions (with its corresponding dualism of “I” and outside “object”) that, in turn, creates this need for a religious experience. Is Divinity thereby reduced to an object that we can choose to internalize or not? If so, what is the effect of choosing to experience that Divinity in a way that is different from what we were taught in the beginning of our lives (if we even choose to experience it in the first place)?

To answer these questions, we must reach into the recesses of memory to glimpse the first moments of wonder in our lives that prompted our endless *why* questions. For example, when we first saw the rising and setting of the sun and moon, we had a physical sense that these orbs were not inside us. Perceiving them as an outside object, we inquired about them. “Why does the sun come up? Why does the moon look different on different nights? Why do they exist? Why?!” Because these *why* questions are always seeking an answer that provides *meaning*, they cannot be answered by empirical facts alone. Instead, they must be rendered, answered in a way that captivates the child’s senses and imagination with stories, myths, spirits, and the will of countless gods and goddesses.

Institutional Ascendancy

But we did not stop with pondering personal mysteries. Stories of personal experience became scriptures. Benign myths became orthodox teachings. And belief became dogma. Cycled over generations, a powerful spiritual experience, felt deeply in our bodies, was reduced to a memory of wonder over which we built our ethereal temples. Answers were no longer within, but came from without. Though some

contemporary religions (Unity, neo-paganism, some elements of Buddhism, etc.) seek to reclaim a sense of internal immanence, for many of the most populous religions on the Earth, the Divine is now located in the heavens, below the earth, in outer space, *out there*. The emphasis here is on the word *located*. As an active verb (not simply a verb of being), we decided that *out there* is where the Divine should be experienced, and we structured our very existence around that assumption. So now, the Divine, by definition, cannot exist within us. How could the Divine reside where I keep my doubts, insecurities, and imperfections? And can my own changing form contain within it something that is timeless and eternal? To answer these questions, I explore the nature of faith, religion, and conversion, and the forces that make religious experience possible through the rest of this chapter.

Faith and Conversion: Leaping To and From

To understand conversion as a phenomenon, I seek to explain and understand it in my own experience. And as a dominant theme that has moved through my life, I must confess that my own conversion was (and is) influenced by the religious discourse that happened around me in my home and in the church of my upbringing. It is in the details of these experiences where the metaphoric seeds of conversion can be found, slowly nurtured by familial expectations, until they flowered into my own religious experience.

Altars: A Secret Dwelling of One's Own

After having grown up in Lima, Peru as a Roman Catholic, my young, twenty-something mother married my father in a Mormon temple in Idaho Falls in the early 1960s. For anyone who knows about the restrictive nature of access to a Mormon temple, that fact implies a serious change occurred. To marry my father in that temple,

my mother had to convert from Catholicism to Mormonism. Faced with the possibility of not seeing her only daughter's wedding, my grandmother went through the motions of conversion to Mormonism to get her through the temple doors. When I asked my mother about it, she said that converting to the husband's religion was something women "just did back then." But what is it that my mother *did* exactly? If it were a conversion out of obligation or duty, was there a sincerity of religious change underneath those marriage vows? Is there even a distinction for her?

In thinking about what it means to convert to a new religious identity, it is helpful to scrutinize the word "convert." The word convert comes from the Latin word *convertere* (*con* + *vertere*), meaning "with" and "a turn around."² The word implies that the person was on a straight and linear path, and has now decidedly gone in a different direction. It is interesting to note that the word *vertere* exists in tandem to its abstract Latin cousin, *versus*. *Versus* implies an opposition where the respective parties are facing each other. In this setting, religions (and perhaps the strictest of their adherents) can be seen as holding a *versus* stance relative to one another. *Vertere* is different, however. It has turned away from the oppositional stance that some religions assume relative to each other, and faces something altogether new. Thus, what is the essence of leaving the traditional *versus* stance of religion (with its comfort and security) for a new *vertere* stance, where it stands in opposition to nothing?

Olamina's insincerity. Truthfully, I suspect my mother's conversion was half-hearted at best. This was nowhere more evident than in the fact that she continued to

² All etymological references come from *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Onions, Friedrichsen, & Burchfield, 1966) unless otherwise noted.

keep an elaborate Catholic altar after her Mormon marriage, a strict violation of Mormon iconoclastic theology, much the way Olamina allowed herself to be baptized as a Baptist despite her misgivings. Yet, even after her divorce from my father, my mother continued to attend Mormon services and identify as a Mormon, regularly participating in services and even teaching Sunday school classes. Could it be that this conversion was real on some level, but did not have the expected appearance of a singularly focused devotee of a new religion? Was there something about my mother's experience that prompted me to consider this question of conversion and belief in God in such nuanced detail?

To explore this idea, I reflect back to the altar my mother meticulously maintains. The word altar comes from the Late Latin term *altare*, meaning a "table for sacrificial offering." Is my mother sacrificing something on that altar? Is the altar itself a sacrifice for a belief system to which she used to subscribe? Every detail is significant in some way: a statue she inherited from a dead relative, a rosary owned by her father, and statues of Peru's patron saints, *San Martin de Porre* and *Santa Rosa de Lima*. Each item is a symbol of a relationship she once had or a moment she keeps dear. Pictures of our family members are protectively enshrined around warding crosses and placid-faced holy figures. Her altar's centerpiece is a large, old bust of a tortured, bleeding Christ (named *El Señor de Limpias*) whose face reveals the excruciating nature of the Passion. Every item is carefully tended, because each item imbues deeper and deeper meaning into the collective symbol of the altar, which is comprised of smaller symbols of relationships, protection, identity, hope, authority, family, language, and even defiance. In sum, each and every item on that altar is carefully sheltered and protected, and in turn, offers a kind of shelter and protection to my mother and those around her.

Dwelling safely. The altar proves to be a safe dwelling for all of the items it contains. And through those items, her values dwell here. Perhaps some very private part of her dwells in this unusual shelter for her soul? Heidegger (1993a) explores the profound impact of dwelling as a concept and as a human necessity. He suggests that humans need to dwell in something as an expression of their very Being, as essential to being human as breathing and eating. Heidegger says:

To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence. The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing. It pervades dwelling in its whole range. The range reveals itself to us as soon as we recall that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth. (p. 351)

Heidegger's quote suggests the feeling that dwelling provides is none other than the safety the earth provides as it shelters us from those things that would rob us of our lives. Such dwelling allows us to briefly forget our mortality or to undertake brave and dangerous deeds, knowing that we can return to the Earth's embrace. The quote raises an intriguing possibility around my mother's complicated conversion to Mormonism. By having a refuge that safely held her Catholic beliefs, is my mother's entire network of relationships to her family and friends (indeed, her entire past and all the memories from those relationships) held intact, despite undergoing a public religious conversion? Is it possible that her conversion to Mormonism nevertheless contained some elements of authenticity, because she knew that her past was perfectly enshrined in a place she recognized as sacred and honorable? It raises the possibility that conversion can simultaneously (and paradoxically) be and not be, where being and becoming are connected through a metaphoric bridge between the two.

A bridge to safety. Part of understanding this paradox (that a conversion can *be* and *not be* in a single, suitable dwelling: an altar) rests on seeing the altar as having a function of reaching out to span a chasm, as a bridge that connects *past* with *present* or *having this* with *having more*. Yet, how does one dwell on a bridge? What does the bridge connect or disconnect, particularly in conversion? Heidegger's (1993a) exploration of the concept of a bridge provides nuanced understanding of the role my mother's altar plays in her conversion. For Heidegger, the bridge's description suggests the following:

The bridge swings over the stream with ease and power. It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge expressly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood.
(p. 354)

Heidegger's passage suggests that the bridge plays a role of bringing "stream and bank and land" into a close proximity, where the Catholicism of her childhood past faces, and is seen in turn, by her movement to Mormonism. Each of these religious identities is one of the "banks" implying vast territories and depths beyond the bridge itself.

Yet I am also intrigued by Heidegger's attention to the stream as a factor in the Being of a bridge. In a religious conversion, what would be the "stream" that lies between one religious identity and another? What difficulties cannot be forded without the aid of the bridge? Does the altar provide more than shelter, by avoiding a harm that would wildly overtake the convert downstream? And for the convert, what lies

downstream? In the interplay of stream and person crossing the bridge, Heidegger says: “The bridge lets the stream run its course and at the same time grants mortals their way, so that they may come and go from shore to shore” (p. 354). This sentence, profound in its simplicity, offers many flexible possibilities around the concept of conversion as also described through Casey’s (1993) terms: *homesteading* and *homecoming*, where homesteading is a “journey to a new place that will become my future home-place” and homecoming is a “return to *the same place*” [emphasis in original] (p. 290). Casey concurs with Heidegger’s sense of the bridge’s metaphoric possibilities when he says: “Homesteading need not be as literal or as land-based” as the term implies (p. 290). Perhaps conversion across a bridge implies an occasional visit to the other bank where the other side is seen as a new vista? And a safe retreat to the bank of origin is always a possibility when setting foot on the bridge. The existence of the bridge implies returning to the original bank, crossing the turbulent waters in between, and still being able to see the other side. Was my mother’s altar acting as her bridge, where she could test Mormonism and retreat to the banks of Catholicism to view what Mormonism looked like from that vantage point? Was this altar also allowing the stream in her life to keep running, while not overtaking her? Could this stream have been familial disapproval of her choice? Her altar clearly was an interconnecting place bringing the various dimensions of her conversion together.

Secret sanctuary. The altar and its items were not the only vehicles for meaning. Its construction and placement in our home was also significant. This magnificent, though somewhat moody, shrine to her faith was not in plain view for any to see upon entry to our home. It was carefully secluded near her bedroom out of eyesight to casual

visitors or snooping Mormon home teachers intent on surveillance. In essence, it was a secret, safe place where her Catholic self was allowed simply to be. Regarding secret places, van Manen (1996) writes:

While the primary function of a secret hiding place is to conceal someone's presence, it also provides a space of shelter and safety where one can withdraw from the outside world. The hiding place may well be the simplest example of the phenomenon of secrecy. In the hiding place one can make oneself physically invisible to others and thus find the security of shelter or escape. Even the home can be experienced as a place where one seeks shelter and cover from the world. But the secret place of the home does more than offer physical invisibility; it also may offer a sense of the intimacy and the mystery of things. (p. 23)

This quote is illuminating, because it provides deeper meaning to the possible purpose of a secret altar. My mother was not *out of the closet* outside the home regarding her continuing Catholic inclinations (and often claimed it was simply a vestige of her former self). Yet, the altar clearly had deep personal significance to her. It could not hide her physically, but it did hide her truer spiritual and social self, particularly from the “outside world” of Mormonism. Yet, van Manen suggests that she may also have experienced a “sense of the intimacy and the mystery of things.”

Heidegger (1962) also adds insight to the nature of this secret place when he says: “A sign is something ontically ready-to-hand, which functions both as this definite equipment and as something indicative of the ontological structure of readiness-to-hand, of referential totalities, and of worldhood” (p. 114). In this quote, *ready-to-hand* is a concept that describes objects as more than just objects, but as ontological constructors of our various lived worlds. They are those items, superficially material, that also construct the immaterial Heideggerian worlds in which we live. And every so often, those *ready-*

to-hand objects also attain the status of a sign, providing material functionality as well as ontological material to understand even those aspects of our world that transcend our world. Such was my mother's altar. It was a defined *space* in the physical world that also defined *Catholicism* in an immediate way to my mother. But this altar of Catholicism also radiated across its own boundaries, because even in Mormon spaces, my mother always had a *ready-to-hand* touchstone of Catholicism a mere thought away. Through this altar, her Catholic world could always permeate her Mormon world. What spiritual possibilities exist when a personal secret place is so *ready-to-hand*, literally just outside her bedroom door? And if complete privacy were desired, why not place the altar *within* the bedroom? Is it an indication of the need for privacy, while also inviting some family intimacy as well? As children, we were not to disturb her altar in any way. But as we grew older, she let me know that I was welcome to place something there.

The purpose of in-between space. I may never know the deepest meaning of this secret place to her, but its importance was clear. Was the proximity to her bedroom an indication of a filial intimacy she felt for God? This significance became apparent when the Bishop of our ward (a Mormon term for our congregation) asked to use the restroom and discovered blasphemy instead. He quickly reminded my mother that "Mormons do not keep saints." Her terse reply spoke volumes. "This one does." And that was that. To my knowledge, the Bishop never raised the issue again, nor did my mother invite Mormons into our house ever again either.

The exchange stays with me, however, because it revealed so much about the nature of religious conversion, even as it re-concealed the deeply personal purpose of my mother's altar from Mormon supervisory authority. In the light of disapproval, what

purpose does a clandestine altar serve. Is this altar an *alter* of my mother's own truer self? Was she claiming a third, in-between space for religious experience that did not readily appear in our social milieu? Casey (1993) suggests that people today often experience "an insidious nomadism endemic to modern times, in which the individual, afflicted with disorientation and anomie, drifts within the indifferent spaces of housing developments and shopping centers and superhighways" (p. 275). To Casey's list, I add those religious settings that are "indifferent" to the flexibility people need to find fulfillment and depth, beyond a particular religious identity. My mother needed that third space to allow her complex religious identity to exist without constant turmoil, a protective liminal space that protected, and ironically, reinforced a sense of marginalization. Aoki (2005) calls this third space "the zone between... [where the concern] is not so much a matter of overcoming the tensionality but more a matter of dwelling aright within it" (p. 163). Without a lot of fanfare or internal processing, I took my mother's story to heart and learned the lesson that some religious beliefs and experiences need to be concealed, at least until the time is right.

Troubling Scripture

The truth is that scripture troubles me, a great deal. And it is not only specific scriptural passages. All scripture *as scripture* contains within it a tremendous power of social influence and control that concerns me. And, yet, I also am humbled by the possibility (in which I am not sure I fully believe) that it was penned by a divine author, whispering a sequence of human words into the ears of ancient scribes or inspired by philosophical muse prompting epiphany and insight. Being revered by countless people necessarily implies that a single book can have more validity and status than my own

perceptions and lived experiences as a real, living human being. In the scale of believability, perhaps I am vastly outweighed by a collection of words.

Yet, how can we know that the words we read in the Bible, Qur'an, Torah, Rig Veda, Upanishads, or other sacred texts have *divine* meaning and purpose, beyond that implied by their human authors? If the gods are divine and eternal, are their words also divine and eternal? At the very least, I am in awe at the fact that billions of my fellow human beings hold particular passages of words as verbatim communication from God. How should I behave when I disagree with the words of God? Do I have the *right* to interpret scripture? Do I have an obligation to interpret scripture? Should scripture be understood as unchanging or as needing interpretation and context for proper understanding? Do the words of scripture simply and plainly say what they say or do they say anything at all without someone saying them?

Exegesis: Hermeneutic rejection of racism. To interpret scripture is to engage in a process of exegesis, a hermeneutic process that implies a need to understand context and nuances of language and translation imbued with the promptings of the individual human heart and reason. The word *exegesis* comes from the Greek word *exêgeîsthai*, simply meaning “to interpret.” Yet its etymological origins reveal deeper and somewhat contradictory meanings. *Exêgeîsthai* comes from *ex*, meaning “outside,” and *hêgeîsthai*, meaning “guide.” Thus, exegesis has as its root meaning a hierarchical sense that to interpret scripture is to depart from the established wisdom of someone who has gone before me, a guide. In English, a guide is often understood as a positive term, implying someone who wants to help you from falling into danger. Moreover, the root *hêgeîsthai* implies that the word *guide* can have various shades of meaning, one which is

hierarchical and the other as Socratic and helpful. In the hierarchical sense, *hêgeîsthai* is closely associated with the word *hegemony*, meaning “leadership, predominant authority, as of one state of a union.” Thus, this root also gives us the Greek *hegemón*, meaning “leader.” Yet these hierarchical terms are also related to the more Socratic term “educate,” coming from the Latin term *educere* meaning “to lead out” or to “bring out” in the way that good educators do with their students. Taken together, exegesis (interpretation) is properly understood as an act whose meaning is defined by the contextual authority around the exegete, either one that takes one from the established (and safe) fold of a community that is fully contained within a tightly structured sphere of authorized leadership, a socio-politically motivated leadership, in particular or as a good educator who leads forth thoughts from the inside to the outside. To be an exegete and to engage in the act of interpretation is to either be a seditious rebel who questions not just the words of scripture, but the sanction those words are given by leaders in the human community and the social structures that follow or as a liberated being seeking insight and enlightenment. Unfortunately, my experience of exegesis was the former.

In light of these etymological descriptions, I was definitely a young exegete in the hierarchical and hostile context of the Mormon church, especially as I struggled with Mormon doctrine as espoused in the Book of Mormon (taught regularly on Sunday). It is no secret that Mormon doctrine is peppered with racist notions of God’s approval or favor being connected to skin color. For example, well through the 1960s, the church forbade black men from holding the priesthood in the church (something that is common to *all* white males in the church), because blackness of skin is directly connected to the cursed “mark” that God set upon Cain after slaying Abel in the book of Genesis. It was

common for me to hear Mormon adults referring to black people as “sons and daughters of Cain.” And though the ban on black males holding the priesthood was lifted after the prohibition became embarrassingly public during the civil rights era, the underlying belief that black people are physically marked by God for the actions of Cain continues to be Mormon doctrine.

Mormonism’s racist logic of Cain’s Biblical mark was also used in the Book of Mormon “accounts” of the Americas with respect to the appearance and behavior of two groups of people: Lamanites (understood as Latino people, particularly those of indigenous features and skin color) and Nephites (understood as a mythical white people who lived on the American continent prior to the arrival of white people from Europe whom white Mormons often think of as ancestors). In fact, Mormons believe that the Book of Mormon was translated from golden plates carved by Nephites and taken back to heaven by the angel Moroni.

To understand my exegetical process, it is important to understand what I was reading and experiencing in church, particularly the way Lamanite skin became black when associated with wickedness, and subsequently became white when repentant. The language of the Book of Mormon is quite plain in this description of racial transformation:

And he caused the cursing to come upon them, yeah, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore; as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. (2 Nephi 5:21, Smith, 1981, p. 66)

And the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression and their rebellion against their brethren, who consisted of Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph, and Sam, who were just and holy men. (Alma 3:6, Smith, 1981, p. 214)

And it came to pass that those Lamanites who had united with the Nephites were numbered among the Nephites; And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites; And their young men and daughters became exceedingly fair, and they were numbered among the Nephites, and were called Nephites. (3 Nephi 2:14-16, Smith, 1981, p. 410)

And just like the title of Bilbo Baggins' adventures in "Middle Earth," the Book of Mormon says that that people can change skin color based on their behavior: people with dark skin are literally "there and back again." In fact, Mormon doctrine and leaders were telling me that *all* of the words of the Book of Mormon are literally true and unchanging. Even a young mind produces serious questions of reason around this issue. If God and His laws are eternal, why does this not happen today? Are black people innately wicked and white people innately good (something my experience did not bear out)? If scripture troubled me so deeply, I chose, in turn, to trouble it, too (and in a rather public way).

For whom are these words written? Ellsworth (1997) suggests that good teaching entails troubling language with the question: "Who does this curriculum think you are?" I would like to take her lead and consider the adapted question of "Who does this scripture think you are?" in my own troubling of scripture. In putting forth a picture of divinity having a preference for light skin, this scripture appears to assume that people reading it are light-skinned and in need of a scriptural mirror in which they can reflect on their own experiences with sin. Thus, this scripture is an imagined performance of light-

skinned people in a morality play where real, physical consequences (defined as being black) befall those who displease God.

And though it might be tempting to describe the aforementioned scripture as a morality play for dark-skinned people, it does not seem plausible. First, dark-skin is clearly described not as a state of total being complete unto itself (which real dark-skinned people in the real world experience daily), but as an *obvious* state of punishment. The scripture cannot assume a dark-skinned person reads it, because such a person would innately understand the preposterously two-dimensional characterization of dark-skin as fictitious, fear mongering for light-skinned, racist people. Ellsworth adapted question is a good one, because it gives me the mental, exegetical space to reject that scripture as racist propaganda.

With that intellectual space, I actively consumed the Sunday school assignments and came back with questions of consistency, logic, compassion, forgiveness, etc. I discovered the elating sense of liberation and revelation while engaging in honest exegesis, but I also learned there was a price to pay for being an exegete. No doubt fed up with my questions, my Sunday school teacher referred me to the bishop for a conversation about my lack of testimony and faith in scripture. It was not really a conversation. It was actually an uncomfortable meeting to remind me of my place and the detrimental effects my insubordinate attitude was having on the testimonies of my peers. Though I had already been ordained in the Aaronic priesthood (which one receives as a teenager), I nevertheless did not have the necessary authority to interpret what I was reading. The bishop, the officially sanctioned leader of our congregation,

held sufficient authority and understanding, I was told. He chose a passage from the Bible to have me ponder the error of my ways:

By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. (Matthew 13:14-15)

According to this bishop, this passage was clearly saying that understanding the deepest meaning of scripture would not come about through thinking or questioning, because those are processes fundamentally resting on the use of the body and everything to which it extends. The body, I was told, would deceive and ultimately betray me to sin. Thus, I should simply put those pesky questions out of my head, listen to him, and pray about it. The message was clear. I was allowed to engage in a process of exegesis only so long as I arrived at the end point proscribed by Mormon hegemony and its authorized hegemons. It was only at that time that I thoroughly understood *through my own lived experience*, the earlier lesson of my mother's altar. I could engage in exegesis, but I needed to keep it to myself, secret and private.

The body's poetic of scripture. The effect of the passage in the Book of Matthew on me, however, was not that for which the bishop hoped. He wanted me to trust words, his words particularly, over the lessons of my experience as lived through my body. I had come to trust my body and the promptings I found there. I had avoided danger by heeding the calls of a tight stomach or recalling the feel of a painful injury. Even as a child, I had found simple joy in the smell of blooming flowers or the sweet taste of pudding. And I keenly remember that seeing my mother cry made me cry, too.

No—my body was no liar. My senses made sense to me *and for me*. And yet, I had lingering doubt. Was the reality of my body enough?

Rilke (2005) defends the primacy of the body definitively as the foundation for his poetry in the first poem of the *Book of Monastic Life* in his religious opus, *The Book of Hours*. He says:

The hour is striking so close above me,
so clear and sharp,
that all my senses ring with it.
I feel it now: there's a power in me
to grasp and give shape to my world.

I know that nothing has ever been real
without my beholding it.
All becoming has needed me.
My looking ripens things
and they come toward me, to meet and be met.
(p. 43)

Rilke's poem illustrates the powerful role that the body has in *understanding* mystical experiences, because he describes the body as foundational in *creating the opportunity* for those experiences in the first place. For Rilke and for me, the body is to be trusted and heeded because of the simultaneous ontic and existential knowledge that it brings, something higher education and religion scholar Maria Lichmann (2005) describes as “incarnational knowing [that] seeks to know God through God's traces in creation” (p. 28).

The attempt to have me subordinate my own experience to the wisdom of the Word is nothing new. Abram (1996) asserts that the ability to abstract language away from the sensuous, physical world allows us to devalue it, because abstraction necessarily cuts the ethereal tether between the speaker and that of which is spoken. And is this not the quintessence of scripture? Could we not understand scripture as an ideation of the

ineffable, where sensuous human beings are left comparing their own meager experience of divinity to an idealized form? In my example with this bishop, he strongly suggested that his ideas were a *truer* or *purier* essence of the scriptural interpretation, rather than the *actual* experiences of my own life. Abram illustrates this conundrum when he states:

“The capacity to view and even to dialogue with one’s own words after writing them down, or even in the process of writing them down, enables a new sense of autonomy and independence from others, and even from the sensuous surroundings that had earlier been one’s constant interlocutor” (p. 112). Abram uses the words “autonomy” and “independence,” but he could just as easily used words like “isolated” or “divorced.” His kind euphemism is only softening the harsh reality of divine words (or perhaps language as a whole), namely, that it has driven us out of the natural realm, perhaps forever.

Then what should I conclude about scripture or even the deeper differences between secular and religious ways of being? Is scripture merely words that can be or should be discarded when in conflict with the sensuous? Can I find a bodily way of being that is not in conflict with the religious Word? Can I even come to a deeper understanding of the nature of scripture using the linguistic tool Abram himself critiques? As I read Abram’s words, I wonder if he felt like the mystical Cassandra who warns humanity of impending doom, where no one seems to pay attention long enough to believe her. It begs the uncomfortable question: Can engaging with scripture, even in an honest phenomenological way, truly give me a glimpse of the meaning hidden within? Does the *process* of honest hermeneutic probing justify the *content* of my exegetical conclusions?

These questions nagged me for a long time until I read a more recent article by Abram (2006). It gave me a glimpse at what a solution *could* be to this dilemma. Abram picks up in this article where he left off in his book. He continues the theme that abstractions have been harmful, not because they are innately bad, but because we believe the abstractions to be more real than the obvious reality around us, where we reify our abstractions. He writes: “It [abstraction] has proved itself a very useful illusion, this view from outside the world. Yet it’s now evident that by treating the world as an object from which we ourselves are absent, we are rapidly destroying the ability of this planet to support us” (2006, p. 12)! Thankfully, he goes one step further. He gives a rich example of how abstract language *can* put us back in touch with the sensuous world in a way that is different from our senses. He launches into a beautiful narrative about what a tree must feel as it transforms sunlight into food as a specific example of the sensuous connection and oneness he feels with the world around him. His writing is so clear, that the reader is pulled into his description in a way that conveys its meaning, but also reveals an *artistic* vision that is clearly Abram’s interpretation of his own experience, beyond what he simply sees or experiences in a physical sense. He allows us to see deeper into that physical reality than we would with our own eyes, because we are borrowing his poetic *writing eyes*. Thus, abstract writing can help us see beyond, around, and through the horizontal, vertical, and intermediary invisibility of the world. Said another way, we can use our linguistic abstractions *with artistic and sensory intent* to see everything at once and understand the myriad of interconnections that surround us. Through this process, Abram exalts the body as *the discoverer of mysteries*, a natural hermeneutic researcher of its world. What would it be like to read scripture this way?

Reconsidering the body. And still, does the body's natural ease in *uncovering* and *realizing* justify a significant moral claim? How am I to understand the world without an intense scrutiny of the body itself? Does the uniqueness of every body hinder its claims to moral authority? Is there anything that can be understood from body to body as being in common? I believe there is, and Abram (1996) describes it as the body being mystery unto itself. He says, "To acknowledge that 'I am this body' is not to reduce the mystery of my yearnings and fluid thoughts to a set of mechanisms, or my 'self' to a determinate robot. Rather, it is to affirm the uncanniness of this physical form... Far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things" (pp. 46-47). In accordance with an understanding that all humans discover the world through an infant body programmed to receive and comprehend the world, Abram implies that there is a necessity to return to that quiet mental state where simple observation and recording of the body's experiences is the primary, possibly the only, function of the mind, and that we all share it. And it is this profoundly deep, spiritual dimension implied in the primacy of the body that makes sense to me. Indeed, this is not a rejection of my bishop's quote from the Book of Matthew. It is a hermeneutic understanding of lived experience being expressed through text that lets me see the passage in Matthew as being much more about openness of being as opposed to a closeness of the senses.

Conversion as the body's yearning. As a coda, though several interpretations of the major religions of the world regard the body as *fallen* in some way (unclean, sinful, easily tempted, etc.), I cannot endorse such a simple characterization of our mysterious forms. Indeed, the body is essential in sensing the new space one will inhabit upon

conversion and generating the energy to get there And I am not alone in seeing this fact. Plainly, St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 6) likens the body to a “temple of the Holy Spirit.” Further, Laude (2006) discusses the perfection inherent in our limited physical forms, because limitation creates the necessary state of emptiness that fuels a yearning for divine presence. He says: “Longing, then, is not only a feeling of incompleteness but also, and above all, a desire for a lost completeness” (p. 6). And it is precisely our bodies that are necessary for that experience. “We experience absence, and lack, and deficiency. But this absence is ultimately ours” (p. 9).

Moreover, other religious and spiritual traditions base their primary belief systems on the assumption that the body is a *primary vehicle for experience and learning* to be weighed against the texts of their own tradition. Traditions such as, but not limited to, Buddhism, Taoism, and the myriad forms of Paganism (Wicca, Native American spirituality, Shinto, Yoruba, Druidism, Asatru, etc.) hold that the body is sacred in all its forms and functions and can be a place in which to test the words of scripture. Many of these traditions share meditative practice as a spiritual tool and honor the body-centered insight derived from that meditation. I appreciate Abram’s (1996) description of this common phenomenon that he describes as follows: “Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on—this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits” (p. 53).

Abram’s quote firmly places the body as the central venue for all spiritual exploration, a site to question “truths” upheld in religion, but not necessarily in lived experience. In essence, the body will always be in the midst of, and quietly undertaking, a

deep and spiritual experience. By being in a body, I *necessarily* engage in a never-ending process of exegesis, and either confirm, deny, and/or deeply trouble scriptural claims of inerrancy. It is with this understanding that the bishop's quotation in Matthew justifies my exegesis described above, because the abstraction of scripture, coupled with artistic openness of my senses, brings me far closer to reality than unthinking obedience to a page of words.

But that does not mean that religious orthodoxy will refrain from pushing back. My exegetical heresy and bodily reverence will not go unnoticed. I find that my experience of Mormonism contains within it one tool of religious control and sanction that is widely used to convince people to monitor their own words and behavior, even in the absence of immediate authority. Of course, I am speaking of the power of shame.

Shame: Catalyst of Conversion

Sunday mornings almost always exuded a nervous/happy feeling in me. They promised moments of connection, community, and insight, and invariably also delivered a dose of orthodoxy, catechism, and dogma. This was especially true when we would have many speakers give us the collective affirmation that we were the “true church” and “they” were all misguided with their “wrong” beliefs. “Sure Mom, I’m almost ready to go,” I would answer. But I often wondered: *Who are the “they” we keep talking about, and what are their “wrong” beliefs? And why do we talk about them in a way that implies we don’t like them? Do we even know them?* Do I dare openly ask these questions in Sunday school? Who would I ask? Would it be received as blasphemy? Just imagining the look of sour disapproval from the many faces of my fellow Mormons filled my heart with panic. I could never voice these words aloud, but I knew these

thoughts were heresy. Like a tightly sealed pressure cooker, I sealed my questions deep in my gut, hoping I could contain them.

A Sunday I will never forget. One Sunday when I was 15, in many ways like any other Sunday, we arrived late to the Sacrament meeting (as usual), and my mother insisted on strolling all the way up to the first pews to sit down. My brother and I had become accustomed to this humiliating procession, but we resisted it each and every time. “Can’t we sit back here, Mom?” we would plead. “No, I want to be able to see the speaker. ¡*Vamos!* (Let’s go!).” On our way up, there were the usual reactions I came to expect. I could almost read their minds: “There they go again.” We sat down at the front and waited for the Bishop to introduce this Sunday’s speaker. It was an unusual choice. Today’s speaker was not from our congregation, which was customary. His name was completely forgettable, but his appearance was unmistakable. He had a huge belly, a blotchy red face with a balding head where he had a few wisps of hair, and a ridiculously large nose. If he did not have an aura of anger, he would have been hilarious. Since we were in the first pews, these details were all crystal clear. It must have been a hot day, because he was sweating profusely. It was what he *said*, however, that has remained with me to this day.

Normally, Mormon speeches *euphemistically* refer to the sins we were to avoid instead of naming them directly. On that day, however, we dispensed with that gentle language. Somewhere in his ranting speech, he said, “As Mormons, we are completely and totally opposed to homosexuality. These sick and twisted individuals shall NEVER enter the kingdom of Heaven under any circumstances.” Never, huh? Even though I had never had sex with anyone at that point (male or female), I now had it publicly confirmed

that I would be forbidden a celestial afterlife regardless of what I did (and with whom I did it). I was very angry and very embarrassed. I had no doubts that the entire congregation was secretly looking at me, judging me. My heart beat very fast, and I am sure I was flushing scarlet. It was as if an omnipresent camera on this congregation suddenly panned out to reveal a gulf of space between the nearest person and me. I resolved to control my breathing and survive this horrible spectacle until I could figure out what to do next. All I could feel was the deep sense of shame that the words implied. That moment made me fully feel the widening gulf between me and other Mormons. That distance was created by a very real sense of shame and a belief that people were speaking of that shame behind my back. I do not doubt it. For me, shame and gossip preceded conversion.

Corroboration from a fellow Mormon. It is odd that I find comfort in a fellow Mormon's difficult story of transition, but I do. Terry Tempest Williams (1994) grew up, as I had, as a Mormon in a long line of Mormons. And she also struggled with the confining nature of the Mormon church as she sought to write about the spiritual beauty she found in the American west. In many ways, my transition is a successor to her story. The one significant difference between our stories, however, is that she made her relationship with the church last far longer than I could. Williams relates an example of the awkwardness a Mormon can feel among other Mormons when heterodox beliefs are suddenly expressed. She had been asked to speak in Texas to a group of Mormons about her work, and her only requirement was that this meeting be held outdoors in the Palo Duro Canyon. She says:

I stood in front of the burning mesquite with chalked arms
and my *Book of Mormon* in hand. *If I quoted a scripture*

first, whatever followed would be legitimate. This was important. The Priesthood leaders, men, had inquired about my status in the Church. When I replied, “Naturalist,” they were not comforted. I opened my scriptures and spoke of the earth, the desert, how nature mirrors our own. I began to read from the Doctrine and Covenants, section 88, verse 44—“And the Lord spoke...” when all at once, a pack of coyotes behind the rocks burst forth in a chorus of howls. God’s dogs. I was so overcome with delight at the perfectness of this moment, I forgot all religious protocol and joined them. Throwing back my head, I howled too—and invited the congregation to do likewise—which they did. Mormons and coyotes, united together in a desert howl-lelujah chorus! I said, “Amen.” Silence was resumed and the fireside ended. [emphasis added] (p. 25)

The quote is illuminating about the way Mormon shame works, because of how Williams addressed the questions about her status in the church. Though the questions were no doubt polite, they came from men who had divinely sanctioned authority in the church (something a woman *never* has in the church). Her reaction was brave in admitting her Naturalist inclinations, but she also recognized the need to retreat to the scriptural authority of the *Book of Mormon* and the implied male supremacy within. Had those coyotes not intervened just in time, her lived experience would have been insufficient authority for that congregation. I suspect, though do not know for certain, that this is a critical moment for Williams in her own transition away from the church, because she lacked authority to express her own experience in her own words, instead requiring the words of an authorized male to speak that experience for her.

Shame implying fault. Interestingly, van Manen and Levering (1996) explore these two concepts in the context of what they write on the nature of lying: “Shame always implies fault” (p. 145). In this exploration of shame, van Manen and Levering uncover a basic truth, that shame is about a person knowing him or herself to be

imperfect in some way, and that this knowledge is always in danger of being revealed (voluntarily or not). It is also important to note that this self-knowledge carries a physical price, a burden or punishment that one must bear for one's own imperfections. They continue: "Bodily shame—such as blushing, stammering, or awkwardness—may follow when one feels that one's moral standing in the eyes of others is in doubt" (p. 145). Indeed, my body betrayed a sense of shame in that moment in Sunday school. And van Manen and Levering provide me an example that very much mirrored my own to corroborate the deep physicality of shame and the accompanying impact it had on relationships with other people, particularly when the sense of shame arises out of something that is beyond our personal control.

Van Manen and Levering's abstract language about shame and its physical burden becomes personally concrete when reading about Sasha's asthma in Monica Clarke's (2005) essay, *Memories of Breathing*. Clarke describes her daughter's desire to hide her asthma as "concealment," but she also uses a phrase that makes me think of van Manen and Levering's definitions of shame. Clarke writes: "Hiding asthma becomes a ritual, a personal behaviour, a way of life, and like all hiding, it eventually becomes a secret: a personal burden" (p. 148). It is interesting to note that Clarke uses words such as "frightens people," "noticing," and "stigma" within her essay, but she clearly avoids the term *shame*. The distinction I see is Clarke's unwillingness to ascribe fault to her daughter; i.e., it's not her *fault* that she has asthma. But shame is also associated with the fact that Sasha's illness is a physical *fault* that she undeniably has (though unintentional). And this fault frightens and disturbs people, which in turn, encourages gossip and collusion in their sense of superiority. I believe that Sasha may feel shame, though her

mother does not explicitly state it, and it stands to reason that shame is the private mirror of public gossip.

Gossip feeds shame. And so how does all this fit with the concept of gossip? Again, the clues lie in van Manen and Levering's (1996) text. Of gossip, they state: "Another motivation for gossip may lie in its tendency to be a leveling device. When I learn gossip about highly placed or revered people's shadowy qualities or dubious deeds, I may feel that they are more like ordinary people. So the impetus to gossip may lie in its function to belittle, to humiliate, to find *fault* where no *fault* may exist" [emphasis added] (p. 135). I see the physical connection in how Sasha must feel as she hides her burden (as in the example of taking a dose of her inhaler with a whirling motion). She does not want the others to see her burden (her fault), and must experience some level of shame as a by-product. But, Sasha does not exist in isolation. She exists in a network of people who must invariably notice something about her, if only that she cannot always participate in activities in which other children delight. Surely, some of them are talking behind her back about her *fault*, whether they know the specifics or not. Is there not a connection between the kind of shame Sasha felt and the kind I felt when discussions of sexuality arose? Was shame (and its acute by-product, gossip) necessary to fuel my movement away from Mormonism? It appears that shame and gossip point to the same meta-experience of hiding and exposing a particular fault. With shame, the fault is the burden of secrecy on the person who has the fault. Conversely with gossip, the fault is something to be exposed (sometimes in a cruel fashion, but not always) by others who perceive this fault in the first person and wish to reveal what is hidden.

Though it seems inevitable, I am reminded that hurting what is hidden is not the only way to be. Can shame and gossip be disconnected from the need to hide? Can we assert our voice and still remain hidden? Oliver (2007) suggests an intriguing possibility in her poem *'Just a minute,' said a voice...*

'Just a minute,' said a voice in the weeds.
 So I stood still
 in the day's exquisite early morning light
 and so I didn't crush with my great feet
 any small or unusual thing just happening to pass by
 where I was passing by
 on my way to the blueberry fields,
 and maybe it was the toad
 and maybe it was the June beetle
 and maybe it was the pink and tender worm
 who does his work without limbs or eyes
 and does it well
 or maybe it was the walking stick, still frail
 and walking humbly by, looking for a tree,
 or maybe, like Blake's wondrous meeting, it was
 the elves, carrying one of their own
 on a rose-petal coffin away, away
 into the deep grasses. After awhile
 the quaintest voice said, 'Thank you.'
 And then there was silence.
 For the rest, I would keep you wondering.
 (p. 148)

Oliver's poem suggests that deep listening could keep us from harming hidden others by hearing their quiet "voices." Clearly, these voices are not actually spoken, but heard with the heart, felt in an intuitive sense. The difference, of course, still harkens back to the concept of fault (particularly with human identity and behavior). It is impossible to blame a worm or a walking stick for being in the way. Yet are our human natures any different? What would it look like if we "heard" the hidden voices of other people?

Isolation is the fertile ground of conversion. One thing was certain: I realized that I was no longer a Mormon after that awkward Sunday in my youth, and that the

mutually augmenting forces of shame and gossip played a huge role. But how, exactly, did I experience shame when I was still young and not sexually active? From where does shame arise when the shameful behavior does not exist? Alphonso Lingis (2000a) suggests that my conversion experience may have ironically been created within the very context designed to keep me from leaving the church, the secluded and isolationist nature of Mormonism. Of the origin of emotions, Lingis says:

Not only do emotions discharge their forces on the outside environment; they have their source in it... Emotions get their force from the outside, from the swirling winds over the rotating planet, the troubled ocean currents, the clouds hovering over depths of empty outer space, the continental plates shifting and creaking, the volcanoes rising from the oceanic abyss, and the nonsensical compositions of mockingbirds, the whimsical fluttering of butterflies in the racket of a wallow of elephant seals. Their free mobility and energies surge through us; their disquietudes, torments and outbursts channel through us as emotions. (pp. 18-19)

But I felt intense emotion in a place that was not sensing the power of Nature in its most potent form. I was in a brick church with harsh and uncomfortable wooden pews. There was nothing natural or forceful about the environment at all. The light was not natural and the energy was generally that of boredom. Where, then, did such a powerful sense of emotion arise out of that context? Is it possible that these inner spaces create a different emotional sense than the outside world? If some emotions come from “free mobilities and energies,” can enclosed, deadened spaces create some other kind of emotional reaction? Lingis thinks so. Of this opposite possibility, he writes:

People who shut themselves off from the universe shut themselves up not in themselves but within the walls of their private property. They do not feel volcanic, oceanic, hyperborean, and celestial feelings, but only the torpor closed behind the doors of their apartment or suburban ranch house, the hysteria of the traffic, and the agitations of

the currency on the stretch of turf they find for themselves
on the twentieth floor of some multinational corporation
building. (p. 19)

I would consider adding to Lingis' list the prim, sterile church of my upbringing. Though the sensation of shame was real, intense, and quite physical, Lingis' notions of emotion ask me to consider the possibility that it was not shame over sexuality that I felt that day. Rather, it was a growing acknowledgement that my inner life had become as dead as the church in which I found myself. There was an ember of life that wished to be fanned into a living flame, and I wanted it to grow. Perhaps my shame was over the sense that I had a spark of life left, and I was afraid it would be noticeable. Is shame only the righteous anger that arises when you discover that every other emotion you have has faded into nonexistent irrelevance, and that you resent having placed yourself in that situation for that long? Is shame (especially over faultless conditions of sexual orientation or asthma) simply the collapsed aftermath that simultaneously mourns the oceanic, volcanic, and celestial emotions that once were and yearns for their return? Is shame an essential ingredient to conversion that gives us enough discomfort to actively seek a figuratively *outside* place to re-invigorate a sense of what a connection with the divine should feel like?

Vestments: To Hide and Reveal

From that point forth, though I often felt deeply shamed in church, I continued to attend the Mormon church in an attempt to be a good and righteous person, though I could not say that I believed anymore. And I always had a sense that my clothes were not quite right. The coat felt tight in the shoulder, and the pants felt overly snug in the waist. Was it just the clothes, or was it the experience that itched and did not seem to fit?

Perhaps the discomfort of my clothing was related to the context. The term religion comes from the Latin *religionem* meaning “respect for what is sacred.” By itself, *religionem* seems to have been unchanged in its journey to the modern term *religion*. *Religionem*, however, is also closely connected to its Latin variant *religare* meaning “to bind fast” and “place an obligation on.” Hence, the term *religion* is related to *religare*’s modern equivalent, to *rely*.

In looking closely at these two related terms, I can understand the metaphor of my discomfort. The experience of going to church was not simply a one-way act of paying my respects to the sacred. There was also a subtle undercurrent of social expectation that flowed back to me. As I participated in religion, the cycle completed itself through my religion’s *reliance* on my faithful attendance and participation, an invisible yoke that obligated me to undertake the responsibilities associated with being a member of this religion. Thus, my tight clothing only reflected my inner reality where I recognized the mounting pressure and weight of my religion on me. If others felt as I did, there must be a moment where they question the seemingly inescapable gravity of their own surroundings. What then? An exploration of conversion scrutinizes the sequence of events that lead us to a new faith. What is actually *happening* when we convert to something else? What are we *doing* when we declare that we no longer practice one religion, but are practicing another? We may wear a new garment or subscribe to a new philosophy, but is there something truly different about us? If the Divine is outside of us as the focus of religion, is there something different about our *inside world* when we choose a new religious practice? If so, what is that difference? For those who notice the

uncomfortable fit of their spiritual clothing, perhaps they seek to convert to another religion.

Surreal discomfort: Vertigo. It is certainly possible that conversion can be disquieting or even frightening. Just because one chooses a new spiritual or religious path, it does not logically follow that this new journey is savored with perfect joy. It is reasonable to assume that the choosing of a religious identity can come from a very destabilizing life experience that calls everything one once believed into question. Death, divorce, or natural disasters frequently force people to reconsider the bedrock principles and ideas that they cherished in their life up to that point. Some cling to existing faith, but others lose their spiritual mooring, seeking any kind of comfort in new ideas and beliefs. Citing the apocryphal story of the Blessed Isabetta's religious conversion after a failed suicide attempt to jump from a bell tower (due to vertigo), Massimo Leone (2003) describes his views of this kind of unpleasant religious conversion as follows:

Religious conversion... [comes] from this vertiginous point of view; i.e., from the perspective of how what we shall call the 'religious self' of a person is destabilized by the encounter with a different system of religious ideas and becomes aware, for the first time, as in an attack of vertigo, of the precariousness of its previous stability. (p. xi)

Leone's basic premise is that religious conversion is a process that begins with a destabilization of the self from an encounter with a traumatic event or counter-intuitive thinking. This destabilization creates a sense of dissonance in the self that leads to a moment of crisis that cries for resolution. In turn, the achievement of new belief *becomes* the resolution that re-stabilizes the self. An element of my own religious autobiography resonates with this explanation of conversion. After the death of my grandmother, my own vague agnostic beliefs were challenged, because I did not have a sense that my

grandmother's essence simply ceased to exist. There was a part of me that still believed some part of her existed in a way that I could not fully and logically understand or clearly articulate. The funeral produced many of the vertigo experiences that Leone references that gave me (and my family) a sense that our reality had been shaken to the core. It did, however, produce a change in religious outlook.

Further discomfort: Surrender. In keeping with the idea that not all religious changes are experienced as perfectly comfortable or joyous, ample anecdotal social discourse suggests that some religions define conversion *for the converter* in a way that is about total submission to the religion and the worshipped deity. Some Christian conversions are frequently described using a metaphor of the cessation of battle, but the cessation is not necessarily about a newfound, peaceful understanding among the parties. Rather, it can be about establishing détente conditions between an innately unclean and willful human and a stern, barely-forgiving God (if the primary focus is on the power/status imbalance between a removed, omnipotent God and small or unclean humans). Additionally, this surrender is clearly on the absolute terms of the Christian God; i.e., the human is expected to *give up* and *surrender oneself* to be a *true* convert to religion.

But what happens to the converter in this context? Does this conversion require that the converter relinquish his or her authentic self? Anton's exploration of the *chora* concept yields a clue that this kind of conversion requires a sacrifice of an authentic self. Of *chora*, Anton (2001) states:

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger suggestively writes, "Might *chora* not mean: that which abstracts itself from every particular, that which withdraws, and in such a way precisely admits, and 'makes place' for something

else? ...Earth, properly speaking, degenerates and loses itself. (pp. 18-19)

From the vantage point of a surrendering conversion, Earthly and natural humans will be expected to follow the Earth's self-deprecating example. To convert to this kind of religious experience, an Earthly human must create room for this new God, space that was previously occupied by his or her authentic (Earthly) self. The effects this kind of conversion can potentially have on children in school are described below.

Conversion is not implanting eyes, for they exist already;
but giving them a right direction, which they have not.
(Plato, 1894, p. 212)

Donning new clothes: When? Plato's conversion quote is meaningful, because it encompasses a basic sense that changing one's religious identity need not necessarily be about a negative experience or about ceasing to be the particular religious (or non-religious) person one used to be. Because every person is always changing throughout life, ceasing to be the person-one-was the day before would be constant, whether one converted or not. Rather, it is about seeking new directions where an individual can find meaning, and subsequently, satisfying personal growth over a lifetime. The specific experience of conversion, however, can come in a variety of other flavors that perhaps reflects the personal orientation of the converter, the way the converter makes meaning of the experience, and/or the philosophies/dogma of the religion to which the individual converted.

Though we typically think of a conversion as happening *after* a search for something new, the etymology of convert (see above) implies that a conversion takes place *before* we start our search. Once off the inherited path, a seeker is already *converted*. Now moving in a new direction, other religions are no longer seen as

opponents. Rather, they are each anticipated as a possible goal or something to pursue. Each opens doorways to new possibilities of identity and comfort. Even if we only choose one new religious identity, how do we feel about the other religious identities that we did not choose, but held as possible options? When we choose a new identity, do we revert to a *versus* stance in opposition to other religions? Or do we remain in the new, non-oppositional *vertere* stance, open to other possibilities?

In redefining our religious identity, our openness to others who are different may be connected to an empathic sense of what it felt like to be an outsider in one's own spiritual community. So when a seeker finds a new religious *home*, perhaps the word to describe that human experience would be the term *arrival*, instead of *converted* (which actually happened somewhere in the distant past).

Finding self there: Natural awakening. Are there alternative conversion experiences than the ones described above? A middle-of-the-road perspective on conversion is one in which the conversion is experienced as something that simply *happens* in one's life without much effort or attention to process. If this process simply exists, why does it exist in some individuals and not in others? Perhaps it has to do with the desire to examine the event in the hope of finding patterns? What are the facts that make this type of conversion possible? Rumi (1995) writes about this type of conversion in a poem that focuses on the awakening of our natures. In *The Dream that Must Be Interpreted*, he writes:

We emerged into plant life, and into the animal state, and then into being human, and always we have forgotten our former states, except in early spring when we slightly recall being green again. That's how a young person turns toward a teacher. That's how a baby leans toward the breast, without knowing the secret of its desire, yet turning

instinctively. Humankind is being led along an evolving course, through this migration of intelligences, and though we seem to be sleeping, there is an *inner wakefulness* that directs the dream, and that will eventually startle us back to the truth of who we are. [emphasis added] (pp. Mathnawi IV, 3654-3667)

Here, the basic sense of conversion is that it is perfectly natural to experience the conversion, akin to the idea that it is natural for a body to wake up after a sleep, especially if one sleeps deeply and with blinders. Embedded within this natural wakefulness, however, is Rumi's assertion that we are startled with the "truth of who we are." He does not provide an answer for that truth, however. Perhaps that is something that will be left to the individual waking up to explain.

Raising consciousness to touch immanence. Still another way to experience conversion is through a sense of self-realization, sometimes called the *raising of consciousness*. Experiencing this consciousness is difficult, however, because we exist in a society that discourages interconnected consciousness and deep reflection as antithetical to our mechanized, modern understanding of the world. Starhawk (1988), the feminist writer and activist, comments on this social ill: "Estrangement permeates our culture so strongly, that to us it seems to be consciousness itself" (p. 9). Her concern rests with the fact that many people see the clearer understandings they have of the reality around them (a society estranged from itself and the Earth) as the conversion experience itself; i.e., that the waking is sufficient for conversion. She strongly disagrees. Instead, Starhawk says that this initial conversion needs to be overcome by seeking something *after* the awakening, a further conversion. She suggests seeking a conversion to *immanence*, an idea, feeling, and/or belief in an inherent interconnected nature of all things akin to what is also described in Abram's (1996) book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Abram echoes

Starhawk's sense of immanence when he asserts that people are beginning to crave a consciousness that integrates them to the world around them and their own bodies. In referencing the works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty on the topics of space and time, Abram says: "Their later writings provide tantalizing clues, talismans for those who are struggling today to bring their minds and their bodies back together, and so to regain a full-blooded awareness of the present" (p. 206).

Both authors essentially indicate that Rumi's natural awakening is not enough to have, what they call, a full conversion experience, because his account of "waking up," assuming a kind of profound wakefulness that innately and intuitively understands a singular nature of the universe, is not actually engaging in the struggle to solve the problems the individual experiences after waking up. For Starhawk and Abram, only through seeking a new consciousness will that person find deeper meaning and connection, and thus, conversion.

Doing without doing: Simple acceptance. Whether conversion is difficult, forced, painful, natural, or something that is strongly sought after, at some point the conversion experience is met with acceptance. It may happen in the very beginning, or may be the culmination of a long personal journey. Madeleine L'Engle (2007) describes her experience as being somewhat uneventful, even in the beginning. She says: "Conversion for me was not a Damascus Road experience. I slowly moved into an intellectual acceptance of what my intuition had always known" (p. 1). For L'Engle, it was not a lightning bolt that struck her (yielding neither pain or pleasure). Rather, it simply was confirming what she sensed she knew innately all along; i.e., she was awake the whole time.

Yet another approach to the simple acceptance experience of conversion could lie in the way Buddhists express an understanding of their faith. One *becomes* a Buddhist over the long journey of practicing Buddhist meditation. It simply happens along the way... Steve Hagen (1997), a Zen priest, describes this experience as: “You will gradually learn to sit like a mountain. Though thoughts will arise, they are merely clouds passing by the mountain. The mountain need not be perturbed by clouds. The clouds pass on, and the mountain continues to sit—observing all, grasping at nothing” (p. 106). In this setting, the conversion is not about sleeping, waking, or even obtaining consciousness. It is described in the more elusive terms of *enlightenment* where *one is, because one does*.

The effect on the self. In thinking about conversion, it is interesting to note the way these various authors talk about the self are vastly different, particularly where, when, how, and whether conversion occurs. In the examples of conversion as *surrender*, the self is clearly defined as a single individual who has particular qualities that need to be controlled. Yet, other religious ideas suggest that the self is illusory altogether. For example, in a Buddhist context (where the belief in the self is *part of the problem*) what does it mean to convert? Who is converting, if there is no self to convert? Does one simply realize a different identity? Would this concept even make any sense in that context? Abram’s (1996) work also raises similar questions. If we need to become reconnected to the sensuous Earth, particularly through the remembrance of air re-invested with our collective consciousness, is there a self that is distinct from anyone else or anything else to which one would connect?

The metaphor of our religious clothing would suggest that all of these kinds of uniquely individual conversion experiences are possible given that every article of clothing feels different when worn over time. If we are successful in *wearing them in*, then the clothing will no longer feel uncomfortable. In this example, we will be happy in our religion. Yet, if even after prolonged use these articles of clothing continue to itch or feel wrong, we will suffer them silently, remove them altogether, or judiciously alter them to our unique tastes. Given the apparent depth of the phenomenon of religious experience, it begs the question of what conditions are necessary for a change of religion. Thus, the following part of this chapter explores those necessary conditions through the concept of overcoming the inertia of remaining in a seemingly safe initial place toward a new faith.

Overcoming Velleity: Finding the Right Combination

Conversion was not easy for me as a teenager and young adult. During those years, there is abundant reason for young people to let the difficulties they encounter simply be, to go with the flow, to hope for a spiritual experience that is different. How easy it would be if we were not what we are. Yet, something moved me and moves young people today from hoping for a different spiritual experience to actually seeking something, even if it goes against the grain of life. Something moves velleity into action. Velleity comes from the medieval Latin words *velle* and *velleitas* meaning “to wish,” and is also related to concepts of “will.” Of everything described above, which ingredient or combination is a critical catalyst that turns wishful *velleity* into a concerted search for something different? In other words, what components create a conversion? Which parts

and in which proportion, particularly for idealistic young people? If *velleity* is connected to the concept of wishing, do the specifics of what we wish for matter in creating action?

Learning Environments as a Well of Experience

Simone's Haiku

See yourself anew
 Speak your truth within the well
 Echoes from below
 (Brimhall-Vargas, 2006)

Though I wrote the above poem for a friend of mine, I find that it poses a particular image that I find useful to consider the components of religious conversion. Though Simone is not the well per se, it becomes a way to measure who she is or who she wishes to be. Indeed, it is a metaphor I may borrow for the same purpose. The well becomes a reflective device with multiple resonances when reflecting what has been put inside a particular person.

Danielewski (2000) explores the “multiple resonances” that exist within every person through the Greek myth of Echo:

She made the mistake of helping Zeus succeed in one of his sexual conquests. Hera found out and punished Echo, making it impossible for her to say anything except the last words spoken to her. Soon after, Echo fell in love with Narcissus whose obsession with himself caused her to pine away until only her voice remained. Another lesser known version of this myth has Pan falling in love with Echo. Echo, however, rejects his amorous offers and Pan, being the god of civility and restraint, tears her to pieces... But Echo is an insurgent. Despite the divine constraints imposed upon her, she still manages to subvert the god's ruling... Echo colours the words with faint *traces of sorrow* (*The Narcissus myth*) or *accusation* (*The Pan myth*) never present in the original. [emphasis added] (p. 41)

If Danielewski's Echo bears any likeness to the echo of my own poem, it implies a sense that religious conversion may necessarily begin with a darker sense of discomfort and

disillusionment. What parts of religious conversion find their origins in “traces of sorrow” or “accusation?” How is compunction a part of the process? My own teen-age story reflects both of these sentiments as a core experience to my conversion process, at least in the beginning, and I suspect the same may be true of other people as well.

Sorrow and accusation provide the necessary stimulus to seek another, more welcoming place. They surely play a role in bringing about a personal *turn*, but they cannot fuel the entire journey to another religious identity. At some point, a conversion that *sticks* is one that is fueled with a sense of turning toward something that represents a greater personal truth, rather than simply a turning away from pain.

But what are the components of those truths? How do young people manage to balance the pain of where they are with the joy of where they wish to be? Do the echoes give only a shadow sense of the truth, or are those echoes clear and precise? Just how deep is that well? And can its depths reveal the depths within us? Will others reflect back on their life, as I have, to find those ingredients that played a significant role in defining their lived religious identities? What will come from their wells? My well has been the writing of this chapter. In speaking these truths into the well of phenomenology, I find echoes of meaning reverberate to the surface, telling me about me. I receive an auditory textual reflection of my own lived experiences. I believe this process can solicit the phenomenon of religious conversion from others as well.

When Children Must Surrender

When schools adopt an overt religious identity, these learning environments can become coercive by insisting on the surrender model of conversion. An example of the *necessity* of this type of conversion experience is best described in Alan Peshkin’s (1986)

case study of a Christian educational academy, where all students must convert (or at least feign conversion convincingly) to the Baptist faith to remain in the school. In that religious environment, unwavering totality of belief and obedience is demanded because humans are understood to innately seek that which is *worldly* or *natural*. Peshkin says of the headmaster of Bethany Baptist Academy:

He and his fellow educators hold that students know neither their own hearts, nor what is good for them. Students, like all of God's children, are depraved. Born with a "sin nature," they need no help to do wrong, but they must be taught how to do right. (p. 40)

Thus, these Baptist educators see their community as a vehicle through which they can safely and surely preserve the conversion experience from outside interference, while also providing a haven from which to secure the conversion of non-fundamentalists.

Surrender to power. In this context, conversion is experienced within a radically uneven power dynamic; i.e., power-over. Hence, the community around the individual withholds outside influences that can provide the individual with alternative perspectives and beliefs. Absent other viable options, the conversion is experienced as subtly coercive, because the leaders of the community have the power to filter information that would otherwise flow to the individual. Moreover, Peshkin says:

Notwithstanding the administrators' acknowledgement of respect for cultural and ideological diversity, Bethany's students learn about non-fundamentalists as candidates for conversion, on the one hand, and in ways that reconfirm the correctness of their own doctrinal stance, on the other. (p. 132)

Thus, conversion is something that does not happen once to an individual, and subsequently left in the past. Instead, conversion is something that must be vigilantly monitored among the converted, and a state of becoming sought after in others. This

sense of conversion (surrendering to a more powerful, and some would argue militaristic, deity) is best summed up by a quote from Dwight Lyman Moody, an American Evangelist who lived from 1837-1899: “A man, to be converted, has to give up his will, his ways, and his thoughts” (Giga-USA, 2010). According to Moody, one only became a Christian through giving up all future self-determination.

The impact of forced surrender. And what are the consequences of this kind of religious conversion? Citing Perry (1974), Peshkin (1986) suggests that the consequences can be quite negative as he concludes, “Bethany’s total institution is determined to isolate its participants in order to control the stimuli that impinge upon them. This is ‘organizational tyranny,’ a ‘closed universe,’ the ‘thwarting of human possibilities’” (Perry, p. 353; Peshkin, p. 275). In this environment, an individual can only *go with the flow*, because his or her conversion is necessarily predicated upon having fewer life possibilities and a dramatic restriction of personal freedom. Do our own students at the University of Maryland come from such experiences? What do they encounter when they arrive here? What religious experiences characterize their time at the University of Maryland?

Campus Cults: A Sucedaneum of Friendship

Just six months after my arrival as staff at the University of Maryland fourteen years ago, then-Governor Parris Glendening signed Maryland House Joint Resolution 22, entitled, “Task Force to Study the Effects of Cult Activities on Public Senior Higher Education Institutions” on May 21, 1998. This task force was charged with looking into incidents of campus religious organizations targeting students for recruitment during a period when they were most vulnerable, upon arrival during their first year. The ensuing

firestorm of controversy (which culminated in a lawsuit against the University System of Maryland and the Governor Glendening) opened difficult campus conversations about the nature of on-campus religious organizations, particularly of the fundamentalist Christian variety, and the way these organizations recruit or manipulate students. This attention on campus religious recruitment and conversion was not entirely unwarranted. At that time, the campus held an event called *Forced Faith: Discerning Destructive Behavior Patterns in Groups* that highlighted the experience of Susan Saniie, a Maryland student at the time.

Saniie said she was expected to give up 10 percent of her income to the group. But she ended up giving the group \$2,500 in one year. Her grades suffered, too. “My [grade point average] dropped from a 3.3 to a 2.3,” she said. “When I stopped, it went back up to a 3.8.” Saniie left the group after her parents planned an intervention. (Howell, 1997, p. 2)

Saniie’s experience suggests a very extreme variety of the surrender conversion was possibly taking place at the University of Maryland. Is her experience akin to what Peshkin describes in the Baptist academy? What were her experiences in class like, particularly as she had to interact with other students who were not involved in her new religious experiences? Was she even allowed an opportunity for outside experience?

Mixed results. When the lawsuit came about, the Task Force put forth a report that suggested Saniie’s experience was likely an isolated incident and that no further action was needed, though they did concede that the issues involved were huge and riddled with constitutional questions. William Wood (2001), the Task Force Chair, says:

The complexity of the problem is enormous, for example there is conflict in terminology, many divergent views, constitutional issues, and in some instances, the intervention can exacerbate the problem... [Yet] the extent

of group activities causing harm is statistically very small when considering the enormous number of students attending USM institutions, Morgan State University and St. Mary's College. This is based upon a wide range of group activities causing harm reported from these institutions varying from no problems to some problems. However, when interaction with a group causes harm to a student, that harm can be very severe. (pp. 19-20)

This finding of the report (that cults are a serious issue and that they are also a small issue) makes up a significant part of the background of my experience conducting intergroup dialogues in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Maryland.

Conversion “shows up” in dialogue. As a facilitator of intergroup dialogue, I am regularly interacting with students using a dialogic pedagogy that relies on students willingly interacting with one another to gain insight into the lived experiences; i.e., the truths, of other people. And though the Task Force Report suggests that the issue is small, my experience as a facilitator leads me to believe that some part of the forced surrender conversion model is still operating on campus to a noticeable degree. I have experienced and continue to experience students who sign up for dialogue but object to the idea that they are expected to listen to people who have different world views than they do. I was told by a student *in an interfaith dialogue that she willingly signed up for on her own volition* that she had strict objections to reading any materials that did not convey the absolute truth of the Christian Bible, and furthermore, that she objected to a journaling expectation that required her to be self-reflective about what other students told her about their own faith perspectives. While it may appear that this behavior only affected her, it actually affected the dynamic of the entire dialogue. Other students were understandably suspicious of a process where they would be expected to share their experiences where

one person would refrain from participating. *Because of this experience and others very much like it, I am interested in these conversion experiences, because they potentially can hinder the learning that ideally can take place when people engage openly with one another.*

David Bohm and Lee Nichol (2004) suggest that it is precisely this narrow view of truth found in some conversion narratives that can prevent dialogue from happening altogether. Bohm and Nichol say:

They [cannot] get together because they had nothing to talk about. They couldn't share any meaning, because each one felt his meaning was true. How can you share if you are sure you have truth and the other fellow is sure he has truth, and the truths don't agree? How can you share? Therefore, you have to watch out for the notion of truth. Dialogue may not be concerned directly with truth—it may arrive at truth, but it is concerned with meaning. (p. 43)

But the truth that Bohm and Nichol refer to need not be so rigidly defined either. There were also numerous students in dialogue who had experienced conversion of one sort or another who found themselves *more inclined* to participate in dialogue *because* of their religious experience. Their stories are also important in the discovery of the dynamics that exist between people who have experienced conversion. To understand how conversion influences the motivations surrounding engagement, I want to hear the immediate stories of people who have undergone conversion. I seek to converse with them about what conversion has meant in their lives and their experiences with others. And because so much of the university experience is about seeking truth, addressing and understanding the nuanced experience of conversion is very important to any educational endeavor. Ultimately, these experiences call me to the question: **What is the lived experience of religious conversion?**

Walking Phenomenology's Path

In considering the nuanced investigation of this phenomenon and the fact that I have my own experiences that color and affect how I view conversion, I require philosophical guidance in undertaking this research task. Moran (2000) suggests that phenomenology “claims, first and foremost, to be a *radical* way of doing philosophy, a practice rather than a system” (p. 4). In this sense, phenomenology requires a researcher to convey a sense of crucial, formative lived experiences that bring me to the phenomenon (or the phenomenon to me) to give an accurate sense of the lenses through which I view and experience my topic. Moran says:

Phenomenology's first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself. Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within. (p. 4)

Moran's description of the phenomenological process requires that I “understand from within” before I derive “explanations.” To do that, I must enter into rich conversation about the meaning people derive from that experience. Moreover, to study this phenomenon, I need to allow for the inconvenient difficulties of *any* lived experience. I need to explore it as the phenomenon breathes its life. I cannot put it under a microscope to have a sense of what it might look like in a particularly static way. After all, real life cannot be put under glass. Indeed, how can you understand breathing as a phenomenon unless you observe it in motion, as a lived narrative that is deeply embedded in the contextual and interpretive.

Exploring Lifeworld

Van Manen (2003) suggests that phenomenology is particularly well suited to exploring deeply contextualized topics, because of the emphasis placed on the holistic focus on the human lifeworld. He says:

All phenomenological human science research efforts are really explorations into the structure of the human lifeworld, the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations. Our lived experiences and the structures of meanings (themes) in terms of which these lived experiences can be described and interpreted, constitute the immense complexity of the lifeworld. (p. 101)

The key concepts van Manen describes are the explorations into the research topic as it is actually experienced in everyday situations, not those situations that are specifically constructed for the purpose of study or scrutiny. Van Manen advises phenomenologists to allow for the “immense complexity” of the lifeworld, because analysis without its surrounding context is likely to yield myopic understanding of the research topic.

I also appeal to the use of phenomenology because it holds out the possibility that a study of religious meaning making will uncover deep insight into an otherwise ineffable topic. Religious conversion is an intensely personal experience that nevertheless affects every interaction a person has in her/his lifeworld. Van Manen (2003) suggests that phenomenology can describe and interpret these experiences in a very personal and finite way, and yet see these experiences in a broader sense. He says:

As we meet the other, we are able to develop a conversational relation which allows us to transcend our *selves*. In a larger existential sense, human beings have searched in this experience of the other, the communal, the social, for a sense of purpose in life, meaningfulness, grounds for living, as in the religious experience of the absolute Other, God. (p. 105)

With van Manen's guidance, I approach this topic with a desire to seek understanding of the nature of religious conversion, but also to include insights that transcend my own experiences or those of my study's co-researchers. Thus, I turn my scholarly attention to the following questions: What are the various ways to understand or define religious conversion? What social or cultural contexts form the lifeworld around religious conversion? If young people arrive at educational institutions having experienced conversions, what part of that conversion shows up in the classroom? How do they interact with their peers? What essences exist within the phenomenon of religious conversion that yield insights into how/whether people choose to engage with conflicting notions of truth? In sum, **What is the lived experience of religious conversion?**

An Intentional Process of Discovery

To undertake these conversations, I look to the guiding work of van Manen (2003) for the pursuit of this phenomenon. Van Manen suggests that hermeneutic phenomenology engages in six activities that render the phenomenon in its fullness to the researcher and co-researchers. He suggests:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong and orientated pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

From these activities, the phenomenon of religious conversion can be rendered to a degree of clarity that creates insights into the effects it creates for the individual involved and the people who surround that individual. These methodological activities are discussed further in chapter 3, a chapter that explores the philosophy of phenomenology (and particularly the phenomenology of religion and religious experience) as grounding for this research.

Prior to chapter 3, I use chapter 2 as an opportunity to explore and uncover the various dimensions of religious conversion, mining it for essences that bring forth deep meaning for people who experience conversion. The exploration of the phenomenon in chapter 2 provides creative insights into my own experience and the way it continues to define my worldview and the interactions around me. By undertaking this task, I seek to have a fuller understanding of the way others construct meaning around conversion and its impact on their lives. This exploration also opens me to the phenomenon prior to my engagement with the participants in this study.

Chapter 4 is a deep rendering of the phenomenon of religious conversion and intensification as it is described in the lived experiences of the ten participants in my study. This rendering is told through the metaphoric exploration of the trope of the heroic journey, but not on the large scale typical of such stories. Instead, the heroic journey is explored through a *phenomythological* approach (where *phenomythology* is an examination of myth through phenomenological exploration of daily *small* events that give evidence of larger personal and social meaning). Using this approach, my participants provide details into the phenomenon seen through this lens.

The study culminates with Chapter 5 as it seeks to engage larger social discourses around religious conversion and intensification with the stories I rendered in Chapter 4. Because these stories stand in stark contrast to dominant narratives of religious identity development, Chapter 5 posits a queer standpoint in religious conversion narratives that give insight into the larger phenomenon of overall religious identification. And from this new queer positionality, I explore the various insights that arise for educators concerned with creating open and socially-just educational spaces.

CHAPTER 2

SOUNDING CONVERSION: ECHOES OF EXPERIENCE RETURN

I come to the phenomenon of conversion, because I sense parallels between it and good educational practices I have observed and undertaken. To be clear, in seeing *parallels* between religious conversion and progressive education, I do not endorse religious proselytizing of students in any educational setting. In other words, I do not see that the parallel tracks of religious conversion and educational practice converge. Rather, I notice that religious experience, in general, and conversion, in particular, are profound growing experiences that deeply affect a person's inner life, sense of place in the universe, and the relationships that person has to others. The same can be said of good education and pedagogy as in the previous discussion of *educere*, or leading forth something from within. Thus, it is not surprising that Wheatley (2009), an internationally known pedagogue and facilitator of peace-building conversations, describes good, holistic learning in terms that touch on religion. Wheatley says: "In the English language, the word *health* comes from the same root as the word for *whole*. We can't be healthy if we're not in relationship. And *whole* is from the same root word as *holy*" (p. 93). I believe that education is about facilitating the growth of healthy, whole persons. Indeed, for me, that task is sacred. In the chapter that follows, I lift up, and focus on, the phenomenon of conversion through an exploration of faith, certainty, and belonging (all broadly considered). Before addressing those three components of the conversion experience, I reflect on the connection conversion has with the field of education as well as prior work that undergirds my phenomenon, particularly the troubled nature of the terms "identity" and "religion" and how they impact conversion.

Wisdom: Heeding Those Who Have Gone Before

Arriving at the threshold of religion and meaning-making, I am not so naïve as to believe that I can possibly describe, incorporate, and improve upon all the wisdom and learning related to religious identity that has preceded me. In many ways, perhaps, I sense that I am doomed to fall short of my endeavor to describe and fully understand any process as vast and complex as religious conversion. To take the next step requires inspiration, and yes, a little faith that my efforts are not in vain. For courage in the face of insurmountable odds, I look to the poem *The One Day* from poet laureate Donald Hall (1988):

We are one cell perpetually dying and being born, led by a single day that presides over our passage through the thirty thousand days from highchair past work and love to suffering death... Work, love, build a house, and die. *But build a house.* [emphasis added] (p. 61)

But what does it mean to build a house? Do I have the necessary materials? Much of Hall's poem dwells on the difficulties that a human being must endure during life, but nevertheless, finds that all human beings still contribute to their own sense of purpose, despite the adversity around them. The point of the entire poem becomes focused into a small phrase, easily missed, at the end. Though we live in a world fraught with danger, boredom, mediocrity, and pain, Hall tells me to persevere and "build a house" anyway. In undertaking this work, I will attempt to "build a house" based on my research interest. To build this house, I must first secure a firm foundation on which to build. Before opening the phenomena of religious conversion, I 1) explore the shared patterns found between conversion and education; 2) uncover the drifting tendencies of identity (and, hence, its

difficulty in capturing religious experience); and 3) trouble the usefulness of the term “religion” itself.

Common Patterns of Conversion and Education

When people inquire into my research topic, I often get quizzical, confused looks or questions that can all be summed up as: *What does religious conversion have to do with education?* On the surface, these two domains appear to be unrelated or mutually exclusive. Yet, when looking deeper, they share elements or patterns that crisscross into one another. It is only events in the recent past (given commonplace excesses of proselytizing and forced declarations of sectarian fealty) that have made Americans uncomfortable with the idea that education should or could have a role in the inner, or spiritual, development of youth. Noddings (2003) suggests that prohibiting educational settings from pursuing the spiritual and/or ethical development of students is counterproductive to the very process of education and ignores the complex religious identities that students bring into the classroom. Noddings declares that education must do more than teach; it must *care* about the *entire* student:

If the primary aim of all educative effort is the nurturance of the ethical ideal, educational institutions may still differ in their secondary aims. The school, in particular, need not—because it is an educational institution and thus committed to fostering ethicality—abdicate its essential responsibility to train the intellect. This notion is pernicious and silly. (p. 173)

What does it mean to “train the intellect” in a nurturing way? Are nurture and intellect at odds with one another? Noddings is not suggesting, nor do I believe, that educational institutions must sacrifice “training the intellect” for a “secondary aim” of spiritual development. Nor do I interpret Noddings’ advice as a clandestine avenue for religious

proselytizing or coercive conversion to a particular religion. Yet there is something to be gained by providing intentional time and focus on the development of personhood. In the absence of any rigorous and ethical process of self-discovery in education, students now often seek spiritual guidance elsewhere, where there may be a critical lack of integrity, knowledge of the topic, or no experience in progressive, ethical pedagogy. It is precisely from observing this trend that led me and Clark (2008) to conclude the following:

Integrating a multicultural spirituality into curricula content and pedagogy, where disciplinarily appropriate, can... create student *metanoia* (or deep changes of mind); and, bring about more *meaningful educational experiences* for all students. (p. 56)

The emphasis Noddings, Clark, and I wish to convey is the sense that education must be about more than acquisition of facts, figures, and skills. Good education must imbue a sense of meaning and purpose in the lives of our students. When education ceases to do that, students look elsewhere (often in religious settings) and come back to school with a new identity or perspective that will manifest, one way or the other, in the classroom as they engage the curriculum and other students. I believe that educators must be prepared to teach in this new environment where, as Phenix (1975) says: “I do not see the ‘facts’ or the ‘subject matter’ of my courses as the end to be aimed at by my students, but, rather, as the starting material on which their imagination is to act *in pursuit of insight*” [emphasis added] (p. 25). In reflecting on Phenix’s words, I wonder whether a path to insightful teaching will open before me? How difficult is it to emulate Phenix’s approach to a curriculum imbued with meaning? And what are the benefits of achieving this lofty goal?

Believing in progressive multicultural education. To bring about the kind of student experiences that build on existing spiritual identities, I advocate the use of progressive, multicultural education because this pedagogy develops healthy, intelligent adults who consider the needs and experiences of others as well as their own; i.e., multicultural education teaches a sense of mutuality. Through this approach to education, everyone can participate in this conversation and help bring about greater social justice in our society and elsewhere, regardless of power and station. Yet, not everyone agrees that “building a house” with such a great vision is realistic. Ozmon and Craver (1990) are skeptical of this being possible, particularly when achieving a multicultural vision of society is made much more complicated by religious pluralism. They state:

Recent attention to multicultural education represents a reaffirmation of reconstructionist ideas. Reconstructionists have long championed cultural pluralism (or what is now called multiculturalism)... Because of the diversity of world cultures, it is doubtful that a universal code to which every cultural group would pay allegiance could be constructed at this time. Not only does a world law code disregard cultural diversity, it also assumes that it is good to centralize the regulation of human behavior. (p. 191)

I disagree for two reasons. First, achieving and celebrating diversity and multiculturalism is not predicated upon a need to have everyone adhere to a universal motivator or code where everyone becomes the same. Rather, a healthy multicultural society develops from a sense of mutuality where difference thrives without being threatening. Also, I disagree with the defeatist spirit to which Ozmon and Craver succumb. Can educators stay in the field of education without a sense of purpose? Do educators have to maintain a belief that what they are doing matters? I believe that educators need a vision to which they can aspire. If there is an assumption in the very beginning that we can never achieve our

collective goals, then it begs the question: *Why bother to do anything at all?* At that point, it would be rational to simply live in the world with the sole purpose of avoiding harm from others. That is a vision of a mean and cruel world in which I refuse to live. Furthermore, I suspect that a defeatist approach to diversity in education creates a vacuum of meaning that precisely encourages students to look for meaning and hope elsewhere. When considering Ozmon and Craver's critique, I question the finality of their assertion. When does a daunting goal become impossible? Is it inevitable? Does a teacher employing multicultural, spiritual pedagogy find a renewed sense of hope and strength? To me, it speaks to the urgent need to bring a spiritually-inward focus through the vehicle of multicultural education, and the dialogue it generates afterwards, to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible.

Needing a stable experience. Though I disagree with the self-defeating starting point that Ozman and Craver (1990) take, I do take seriously the *a priori* question they should have asked of a multicultural educator: Is there evidence that a multicultural, spiritual education in society is *needed*? I believe the answer is a resounding *yes*, because our society is currently experiencing unprecedented movement in religious identification. Lugo (2008), through the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, conducted the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* where he concludes that people in the United States are converting *constantly*:

The survey finds that *constant movement* characterizes the American religious marketplace, as every major religious group is simultaneously gaining and losing adherents. Those that are growing as a result of religious change are simply gaining new members at a faster rate than they are losing members. Conversely, those that are declining in number because of religious change simply are not attracting enough new members to offset the number of

adherents who are leaving those particular faiths. [emphasis added] (p. 7)

What does it mean for a society to constantly move across religious boundaries?

Does the above survey indicate a deep sense of discontent or disconnection in those places people used to find comfort and meaning? Lugo's survey also limits the collection of data to persons in the U.S. who were 18 years or older. What is the experience of children, not present in the survey by design, who accompany these adults through religious migration? What identity and ideas do they take, in turn, to school when a parent changes religious affiliation? When considering the broader impact of this constant movement, van Biema (2008) alludes to the idea that "American religious culture which is best known for its high participation rates, may now be equally famous (or infamous) for what the new report dubs 'churn'" (p. 1). The term "churn" is not necessarily a positive one here, and is troubling when considering that young people may be caught within those tides. "Churn" comes from the Old English *cyrin*, implying a "butter-making machine" or the process of making butter through "agitation." What is the lived experience of religious conversion when experts describe the environment around that phenomenon as *churning*?

In light of this destabilizing backdrop, an educational environment that seeks to raise questions of meaning and purpose has to account for the many conversions with which students arrive by creating an environment that feels safer and more stable. Koetting and Combs (2005) suggest that educators addressing questions of religion or spirituality can counter the destabilizing churning process of conversion with a more controlled focus on *metanoia*, a less drastic process of internal change. They say:

A spirited epistemology is one in which educational events provide movement toward a *metanoia*, a Greek word meaning a *change of mind*. If individuals undergo a *metanoia*, they move to a less alienated state and a deeper awareness of themselves and others in which they are invited further into their own authenticity. Spiritual transformations or *metanoia* become emancipatory when pluralism and manifestations of spirit within different cultures, traditions, and religions are valued. (Koetting & Combs, 2005, pp. 84-85)

The quote above suggests the crucial nexus of education and religious conversion, namely, *a change of mind that occurs within an environment of valuing pluralism*, something that does not necessarily happen in a strictly religious setting. To accomplish this goal, and to find a way out of the greater cycle of educational alienation described by Gallegos Nava (2001), Rogers (1993), and Ozmon and Craver (1990), requires a pedagogy of dialogue, conversation, and connection to dispel the clouds around open conversations of religion. In essence, a pedagogy that encourages *metanoia* within pluralism makes self-delusions transparent, particularly those delusions of perceiving oneself as innately superior to others or vice versa.

Gallegos Nava (2001) specifically calls for a spiritual dialogue so that its process can uncover what remains comfortably hidden from the view of others and even our own conscience. He says: “We must establish a free communication, in which all unconscious motives can be explored... No one tries to convince or persuade others of the value of their ideas. The point is to learn” (p. 122). It is to this end that Clark (2008) and I strongly suggest, now more than ever, the need to imbue education with a sense of the spiritual, an education that stresses the pluralistic values often ignored in religious settings where those conversions now occur:

In an educational climate in which teaching students to “think critically” is a widely stated priority (even of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, despite its likely superficiality on this point), facilitating student development of *metanoia* is clearly a sociopolitically-located multicultural curriculum content and pedagogy “value added.” In turn, it is this *metanoia* that holds the promise of moving a student to both civic action and group participation. (p. 57)

By bringing about *metanoia* within a nurturing educational context, do students hear echoes of their own private religious experiences? And by contextualizing that *metanoia* within a multicultural curriculum, how do students grapple with the possibly incongruent messages they receive at school, home, and within their own faith communities? I suspect that a nurturing educational experience will carefully and safely hold students while they undergo this healthy, though potentially destabilizing, change of mind.

The personal task of spiritual education. I recognize that seeking to find a point of balance between religious indoctrination and amoral curriculum distribution is difficult (and some might say foolhardy), but I undertake this challenge as the courage of my convictions. As an administrator and educator in a university setting, I know that it is my responsibility to help others bring about greater self-knowledge, knowledge of the world, and familiarity with the world’s peoples, especially in a time when religious conversion is sadly often coupled with nativism or xenophobic ideology. Rogers (1993) describes this vision of an educator as follows: “He [sic] is a *person*, not a faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement, or a sterile pipe through which knowledge is passed from one generation to the next” (p. 186). I could not agree more. I undertake this study, because I believe that young people deserve an opportunity to explore their inner selves, without

the pressure to subscribe to my own limited view of the world, something they are very likely to encounter in a religious setting. Also, I believe that this educational experience can *complement* any religious experience that they might have in another setting. Thus, I undertake this study, in the field of education, because I have the courage to believe that this work matters. To achieve this goal, I take inspiration from Wheatley (2009) who says:

Courageous acts aren't done by people who believe in human badness. Why risk anything if we don't believe in each other? Why stand up for anyone if we don't believe they're worth saving? Who I think you are will determine what I'm willing to do on your behalf. (p. 78)

Wheatley encourages me to weigh the obvious risks of venturing into religious topics in an educational environment against my own belief. Providing a nurturing, holistic education requires educators who will remember the immense good that can be achieved by inviting students to be their whole selves. This means including their religious identities, in the classroom, even if some of what they bring may initially seem inconvenient or distracting. In weighing those risks versus the possible benefits, I choose to step into that risky terrain.

Elusive Identity: *A Priori* to Religious Identity

We judge that a thing is an individual entity (conceptual or otherwise) by its continuity of pattern. We define its identity by naming the set of qualities that constitute its pattern. (Whitcomb, 1993, p. 7)

Before plumbing the depths of religious meaning and identity, I must first understand the curious notion of identity *itself*. If identity is a more slippery concept than it would appear at the outset, what would be the corresponding effect of such fluidity on a

particular slice of identity? What is the effect of reifying religious identity when its root concept is unstable. I consider these questions below.

Identity: One word, many meanings. When Amitava Kumar (2005) married his wife Mona in Toronto, he upset simplistic notions of what it means to convert from one religion to another by suggesting that singular notions of identity with clear demarcations and borders simply cannot accurately capture his lived reality. Kumar is an Indian Hindu and his wife is a Pakistani Muslim, and each agreed that having a traditional wedding in Pakistan *and* India, with their respective traditional marriage rituals, would make both families happy and would usher in a familial harmony that the nations states do not currently enjoy. To marry in Pakistan, Kumar needed to convert to Islam, where he accepted his new Muslim name, Safdar, as a sign of good faith to his new in-laws. In Kumar's mind he was Hindu *and* now he had become Muslim as well. When asked about his marriage conversion by a local boy, Kumar replied:

I repeated to him the lines of poetry written by my friend Ajai Singh in Lucknow: "*Main aadha Hindu hoon, aadha Musalman hoon, Main poori Hindustan hoon*" (I am half a Hindu, I am half a Muslim, I am the whole of India). I told the boy about Nani [his mother-in-law] calling me Safdar. I told him I could see myself being called Safdar. However, I also responded to the name I have had since I was a boy. I was not one or the other; I would be happy to be both. (p. 195)

Kumar is describing a conversion experience that defies simple taxonomies of identity by suggesting that religious conversion is not a simple discarding of the old and taking the new. For Kumar, conversion is cumulative, interwoven, and complex. What possibilities exist for developing spiritual health when conversion can defy the categorical boxes that religious identity reifies? How did the concept of identity become

so static that a single person's marriage can reveal the inadequacy of the concept to capture the experience? Kumar confides that the identity concept contained within conversion can be simultaneously and paradoxically helpful and restrictive. He says:

Although I have been employing the word "conversion" and describing it as a desirable goal, it is perhaps not the right word for what I have in mind, which has more to do with a notion of plural identities. But conversion does help me attack the intransigent border between religions, or at least the sense of religion being a fundamental, unchanging reality. (p. 196)

Clearly, the relationship between conversion and identity requires scrutiny. Kumar reveals that the word conversion raises concrete images of identity transition and finds the image and the word wanting. Yet he also thinks the term conversion is useful, because it contains within it the power to disrupt the artificial borders that exist between religious identities. Given this insight, how should identity be understood? How did identity become concrete, and how can I loosen the term to become useful to this research?

To provide more space around the concept of identity, I turn to multicultural education scholars who have provided the necessary groundwork that disrupts the idea of identity as a static box. Building on the work of other multicultural educators (Young (1990, p. 48), Anzaldúa (1987), Mohanty, Russo, and Torres (1991), and Trinh (1989, p. 94)), Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) suggest a much more fluid definition of identity:

Neither individual identities nor social groups are homogenous or stable. Individuals are constituted partly by group relations and affinities that are "multiple, cross-cutting, fluid and shifting." Postmodern writers have argued persuasively against the notion of a unitary subject and essentialist notions of group identity that ignore the fluid and changing ways that people experience themselves both as individuals and as members of different social

groups over the course of a lifetime. Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak. (p. 10)

In this view of identity, there is an emphasis on the “fluid and changing ways that people experience themselves” that is in alignment with Kumar’s understanding of his own religious conversion. If identity can be “multiple, cross-cutting, fluid and shifting,” how is it that conventional notions of identity are so rigid? To make identity less rigid requires an understanding of what made it rigid in the first place. Only through understanding and deconstructing modern notions of identity can I recapture the fluid experience of religious conversion.

The concreteness of modern identity. When Descartes was credited for the expression “*Je pense, donc je suis*” (I think, therefore, I am), it ushered in a concretized understanding of the Self that has continued to dominate identity discourses to this day as described in Kumar’s discomfort with the way his own Hindu family perceived his wedding. If the Cartesian universe, galaxies, and planets could be understood as a mechanized, ticking clock, luring us to delve into their secrets, so too (Descartes believed) could the universe of the human Self’s body and psyche be understood in a similar way. Identity as a concept became fixed and mechanized, and was forever reduced into smaller and smaller building blocks of identity. In terms of religious conversion, fixed ideology is also attached to those small building blocks. To understand the historical journey of identity, and its corresponding impact on this research, one need only look at the etymology of the word.

Identity comes from the Latin word *identitas*, composed of *idem* meaning “same” and *entitas* meaning “entity.” Consider the following definition by Stein (1975):

Identity: *n.* The state or fact of remaining the same one or ones, as under varying aspects or conditions. The condition of being oneself (or itself) and not another. (p. 659)

Even modern usage of the word identity (as described in the dictionary definition above) implies this strictly reified sense of immovability and predictability. Yet people's lives such as that of Kumar and his wife (and the emerging work of social justice philosophers and educators) tell a different story. Despite the self-proclaimed universality of traditional methodology of Western philosophers such as Descartes, real lives cannot be captured, counted, dissected, and scientifically examined in this way. Frankly (and luckily), our Selves exist beyond that kind of surveillance. Even when thinking about my own religious *identity* related to conversion, I experience places of slippage and ambiguity that question the staid definition of this term. It reminds me of the difference between seeing a moth in flight or scrutinizing that now-dead moth under a microscope. Technically, they both may have the same identity, but they are certainly not the *same entity*.

Additionally, the very idea of *sameness* inherent in the definition of identity is incongruent with the logical *result* of this line of Cartesian thinking: *multiplicity* of identities that describe a single Being. Simply, Descartes' methodological use of Reason to understand identity (especially identities that are not based exclusively upon reason such as religious identity) forces a reduction of the entity into various separate pieces. After undergoing such a process of destruction, how can the entity ever be the same? How can it remain unaffected by that entrapping scrutiny? Given the empirical instability of the lived experience of identity, my research seeks to understand the essential ingredients, phases, movements, inconsistencies, and/or struggles of this construction, particularly as it relates to religion. Thus, the approach I choose follows a quasi-

chronological, interwoven, and *explicitly non-linear* life of a person, an approach that rejects simplistic concepts of identity to capture religious experience.

Preventing conversion: Policing religious identity. In a work detailing her religious conversion away from fundamentalist Christianity to a feminist spirituality, Campbell (2009) frames her story as her group identity (Christian) seeking to control her inner identity, particularly where religion and gender intersect. Campbell deeply felt that she was a fundamentalist Christian, but also was saddened by her restricted role in the church and in missionary work due to her status as a woman. In reflection, Campbell realizes that her conversion away from that form of Christianity simultaneously is interwoven with her emerging identity as a spiritual feminist. She chafes at the admonitions she is given by those around her to be a “good Christian girl.” When she upsets the all-important high school ritual of prom by posing in a prom court picture cross-eyed, she is upbraided by fellow Christians. They compare her behavior against an idealized Christian woman. She says:

One teacher tells me she is concerned that I, a good Christian girl, would act in such a manner. That enrages me, but I simply nod. How do you defend yourself when you’re not even completely sure why you did something anyway? And what, precisely, does it mean to be a good Christian girl? It is the most damning of phrases, capable of felling the most confident of young women. “Good Christian girl.” You either are one or you aren’t. (p. 134)

Campbell’s adolescent memory gives vivid account to the powerful forces that array themselves against the slight possibility of conversion. She describes the constant effort that Christians, in her case, make in keeping other Christians true to an idealized practice of the faith. What need is being fulfilled in making sure that other members of the flock do not stray? What is it about people behaving differently that is threatening? What

beliefs do people infer through behavior? What circumstances encourage the policing of identity to prevent conversion?

Kumar's (2005) account of a visit he took to Kashmir, the contested region between Pakistan and India, sheds light on the prevalence of coercive forces to prevent religious conversion, even when circumstances appear on the surface to warrant something else. When visiting a Hindu refugee camp in Kashmir, he notices an RSS³ decal and comments:

I thanked our host and said that I wanted to walk through the camp. When I got up, I noticed that pasted on the wardrobe were RSS decals, saying *Hamari Sanskriti, Hamara Dharm, Dharmantaran Paap Hai* (Our culture, our religion, Religious Conversion is a Sin). I knew that the ultranationalism of the BJP⁴ had great support in Jammu, but I couldn't help finding that zeal incongruous in the camp. Here were people complaining of not having toilets and having power outages that lasted for several hours each day. They needed civic comforts, not rhetoric; they also need homes, not lessons in hate. (p. 129)

As I contemplate Kumar's account, I wonder: Is the zeal, in fact, "incongruous with the camp?" Is policing of religious identity more likely when basic conditions are poor? Does desperation encourage the reification of simplistic religious identity? Can complex religious identity only be found under better circumstances? Is complex religious identity more a function of group dynamics than individual ones? What, then, am I to make of Campbell's experience of religious identity policing when all of her basic needs are met?

³ *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) translates from Hindi as "National Volunteer Organization." RSS is associated with relief efforts much like the Red Cross, but is also criticized for advocating some extreme forms of nationalism.

⁴ *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) translates from Hindi as "Indian People's Party." BJP is a conservative political party closely associated with Hindu nationalism.

A key to understanding the need to police identity to prevent conversion may be explained by the contrasting metaphors Doll (2000) has of people who are *blockheaded* or *splitheaded*. The blockheaded view encourages an understanding of the self as completely rigid and defined for all time and in all places. Yet, maintaining that rigidity eventually becomes impossible. Life will not be suffocated under concrete. The result is a cracking of the blockheaded view of the self, and a new identity is possible. Doll describes this catalytic moment of becoming a *splithead*:

Unlike the blockheads, however, these splitheads have glimpses or peeps into another side of themselves because they feel split. As such, they are dimly aware that they may be living according to others' expectations as opposed to living from their core. *Social habits prevent psychic movement*. These [individuals] allow their social selves to take the place of their authentic selves, until the difference between the two is blurred. What is reality, what illusion; what is the true self, what the false? Such a person is playing a part in a script written by others. The ones who live like letters written in sand have not dug down beneath the sand to where the river flows, although they intuit "something." [emphasis added] (pp. 82-83)

In this quote, Doll reveals that the desire to police identity comes from "social habits" that "prevent psychic movement." Is modern religion itself a "social habit" that discourages movement? Can conversion be understood as a disruption of a habitual way of being that seeks to traverse new pathways? One thing is certain, conversion forces an understanding of identity that resists being held in blockheaded concreteness and insists on the freedom to incorporate contradictions. If the lived nature of conversion questions the basic understanding of identity, it does so with the concept of religion as well.

Is “Religion” Real?

If identity can be likened to the Doll’s (2000) fluid *letters in running water*, then it stands to reason that a social construction, such as religion, on top of identity will also be hard to define and hold in place. Such was the wisdom of Lao Tzu (1988) when he wrote regarding the problematic way that humans hold on to ideas of religion, especially as a method of bringing about the *good* for society. Lao disputed that it was possible, or even necessary, to try to bring about the *good*, especially through an artificial construct such as *religion*. He says: “I let go of religion and people become serene. I let go all desire for the common good, and the good becomes common as grass” (p. 57). In contemporary philosophy of religion, Lao’s insight regarding the illusory nature of religion is rediscovered in the analysis given by Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s (1991) book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

Finding inside and outside religion. Only when Campbell (2009) had already converted away from fundamentalist Christianity, did she see that religion itself is not a monolithic entity that exists inside and outside a person in the same way. Upon a visit to her brother, also raised in the fundamentalist church, Campbell viscerally feels the incongruence between the religion inside her being and the religion that operates around her as she visits her brother’s new church. This new church setting is a less-literal mainline protestant church, much more in alignment with her spiritual feminism, and yet she continues to bristle at the experience. Evidently, Campbell’s brother notices this discomfort and knowingly says:

“Fundamentalism broke off in us, didn’t it?” he says, never taking his eyes off of the song leader. Yes, it did. Like a sword, fundamentalism was plunged into our bodies, and then it got broken off in us so that we will never, ever heal

from the wound. Like Perpetual Jesus on the Perpetual Cross, we are the walking wounded. By now, the shaft is part of our organs and these smiling, happy people? They have no idea. And yet I know I could have been part of this church. We are cousins, maybe even siblings. (p. 161)

Campbell's experience demonstrates that the narrative of conversion can be disjointed when comparing the external features of religion with the internal tendencies and beliefs of an individual. Even when the external features of the religion are in alignment with a person's new internal beliefs, the old identity is still present as a nagging point of reference. What is *religion* if a person cannot completely convert away from it? What is the relationship between inner and outer religion, and what does that mean for a person who converts to create alignment between the two?

Cantwell Smith (1991) suggests that the starting point or definition of religion needs to be rethought entirely. Instead of a mixing of inner and outer descriptors being merged together into a single unitary whole called *religion*, Cantwell Smith suggests that the inner and outer process of religion be completely split apart for separate analysis (almost describing separate phenomena). He says:

It is that what men have tended to conceive as religion and especially as a religion, can more rewardingly, more truly, be conceived in terms of two factors, different in kind, both dynamic: an historical "cumulative tradition," and the personal faith of men and women. (p. 194)

I find Cantwell Smith's idea interesting, particularly for the notion that it could provide language that bridges the perceptions of an observer and the experiences of the person within the phenomenon such as Campbell. Are there other stories that share this perception? Beyond Lao and Cantwell Smith, are there others who parse the essence of a phenomenon into various spheres of existence?

The reality of the inner world. Though war and religion are not (necessarily) the same phenomenon, they both share a sense of being so large that they are hard to define. O'Brien's (1998) recollection of the Vietnam War in *The Things They Carried* often moves between describing the reality of the war as it was experienced and as it actually happened from an outside perspective. He describes these nuanced differences as *story truth* and *factual truth*, what he calls "happening truth." These truths are both *true* in their own way, but O'Brien clearly prefers story truth because of its *ability to convey more than simply facts*. It conveys emotions and motivations that are not always apparent in "happening truth." O'Brien says of his war experiences:

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth. Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief. Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of *My Khe*. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him. What stories can do, I guess is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again. "Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?" And I can say, honestly, "Of course not." Or I can say, honestly, "Yes." (pp. 179-180)

It is a fascinating proposition that one could respond to a single question with two answers and still be truthful. Such is the complexity of war, and I would suggest that Campbell's description of having completely converted away from fundamentalist Christianity and *not* converted away from it would both be true as well. For Campbell, her story truth is that she is and is not a fundamentalist Christian. In some ways, I also

observe my own curious behaviors that indicate Mormonism still lurks somewhere within me, though I no longer practice that faith. Ultimately, what is religion if I have it and have given it away? It gives me pause to consider that any question I ask my participants may be answered in a number of ways, and those answers will still render truth from that experience, given the differences between inner and outer reality.

The reality of the outer world. As I ponder the nature of religion through the lens of Cantwell Smith, there is one nagging idea that will not leave my mind. By splitting the definition of religion in two, it seems to side step the difficult issues (perhaps on purpose) that exist between and among people of faith with respect to historical realities. In other words, if I do not allow the inner and outer experience of religion to interweave with one another, do I actually contribute to hiding the power among the various religions? If I only focus on the inner experience, am I missing an essential component of conversion that may stem from the “historical traditions,” whose definitions are often more likely described as *contested space*? I am pleased to see that Cantwell Smith (1991) anticipates this dilemma. He does not suggest that researchers should simply ignore those data that point to alternative explanations or points of entry. Rather, they should be incorporated into the larger picture as well. Cantwell Smith says:

The Christian Church in history has often been worse than Christians have recognized; and while believers’ ideals are important, and an observer disregards them at his peril and often all too readily, *yet so are their failures and self-deceptions*, for any adequate understanding of their religious life. [emphasis added] (p. 151)

In providing this Archimedean point, Cantwell Smith provides me the opportunity to engage in conversation about those times when I observe “failures and self-deceptions” in narratives of religious conversion. Because identity and religion are very fluid

foundations for conversion, how can I notice self-deception? When rendered, will it be apparent, in turn, to my participants? Does self-deception undermine the essences of conversion, or is it a component as well? Regardless, having this point on which to stand, thus, makes it possible to attempt Cantwell Smith's difficult dance of leaving religion loosely defined, but still concrete enough to have salience and meaning to people of different faith backgrounds.

Faith: Walking on the Unseen Ground that is God

We cannot be truly human apart from communication... to impede communication is to reduce people to the status of things. (Freire, 2000, p. 123)

Having explored the relationship between conversion, identity, and religion, I now turn to component parts of religious experience and conversion. Specifically, I explore: 1) the effect that God's kenotic absence has on the conversion experience⁵, and 2) the corresponding relationships that people develop with a God that feel simultaneously near and far. In keeping with a sense of openness and balance, it is important to note that these questions indicate answers that are both pleasing and troubling. Freire's (2000) quote above suggests that communication is crucial to the experience of faith, because a personal relationship with God primarily rests on a sense that God cares about the individual and lifts that individual beyond the "status of things." It begs several questions. What *counts* as communicating with God? If we do not sense

⁵ Kenosis, literally meaning "self-emptying," is the focus of an extensive literature dating back through the ages of Christianity debating the theanthropic identity (dual divine and human nature) of the historical Jesus, primarily from Philippians 2:5-8. Though an exploration of kenosis is an important part of religious discourse generally, the use of kenosis in this study is primarily about the sensed temporal absence of God that one finds across all religions.

an answer, are we reduced to a “thing?” Can faith continue in the absence of communication? I explore these questions below.

The Refusal of God’s Immediate Presence

Who can understand Your sublime Nearness and
Separation? (*A Tethered Falcon*, Hafiz, 2006, p. 50)

The very question of religious conversion begs a deeper question of whether we should bother with notions of God at all? What would motivate a person to seek a divine transcendental experience when everything around him or her gives the impression that only the tangible can be verified? Why seek out an elusive God at all? And what makes one path to God more palatable than another, when God *appears* silent to *all* of them? God may walk among us, but certainly not in a literal sense. There are many positive reasons one would choose to seek God through religion, but I believe there is also a deep sense of lack, a negative space that seeks to be filled with the very notion of God, that prompts us into a spiritual journey. Wiesel (2006) and Danielewski (2000) describe this incredible absence of God and the effects it has on the conversion experiences they describe. Also, Baudrillard (1988) explores this empty internal space (which he suggests we have ironically intensified) that craves a connecting, filling force, an idea of God.

When absence is too much to bear.

Humans respond to stars with questions. Why is the
Universe so vast? Why are we so small? Call and response
through the night. (Wheatley, 2009, p. 80)

For many people, God does not answer prayer or ease alienation, because God is not there for them in either way that O’Brien (1998) describes: *story* or *happening* truth. Using Cantwell Smith’s (1991) language, historical traditions ring hollow and internal faith becomes non-existent. For these, conversion may be a humanistic experience that is

purposely disconnected from divinity. When one cannot sense a religious divine being(s), is there something else that can be sensed? What becomes of human relationships when God is not necessarily a part of the equation? What does it mean to lose a divine champion of the existing order one has always known? Simply, what does it mean to lose a religious practice or to choose *no religious practice* at all?

In *Night*, Wiesel's (2006) story of his personal experience with the Nazi Holocaust, he discusses the nuances of his loss of faith initially as a question not of God's existence or non-existence, but rather as a dispute of the belief that God is a being concerned with people, who actually intervenes in human affairs. Wiesel says:

Some of the men spoke of God: His mysterious ways, the sins of the Jewish people, and the redemption to come. As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice. (p. 45)

Is this an initial, or necessary, step toward deism, agnosticism, or atheism? For someone who was so clearly religious, what is the effect of experiencing God as *unconcerned*? Do people, then, find faith in something else? Aristotle (1953), in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, suggests that it is precisely the absence of the gods that allows us to see *each other* as something in which to have faith. We turn to each other. In fact, it is precisely in the moment of crisis when our need for humanity is made most clear. Aristotle says:

Thus friendship is more necessary in adversity, and therefore it is useful friends that are wanted in that condition... Grief is lightened by the sympathy of friends; so that one may raise the question whether they share the burden of it, or whether the explanation is simply that the pleasure of their presence and the consciousness of their sympathy lessens the pain. (Book IX, xi, p. 251)

Though Aristotle's logic is, for the most part, clear and sound, it cannot seem to explain or surround extreme crises like genocide. Toward the end of his experience, Wiesel does find his faith again, but it is not in God *or* humanity. Instead, he finds faith in his own will to survive. At the end, when he has lost his faith, Wiesel appears to find the bedrock of faith's renewal, the Self. Wiesel (2006) says:

And I, the former mystic, was thinking: Yes, man is stronger, greater than God. When Adam and Eve deceived You, You chased them from paradise. When you were displeased by Noah's generation, You brought down the Flood. When Sodom lost Your favor, You caused the heavens to rain down fire and damnation. But look at these men whom You have betrayed, allowing them to be tortured, slaughtered, gassed, and burned, what do they do? They pray before You! They praise Your name!... But now, I no longer pleaded by anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world *without God, without man*. Without love or mercy. [emphasis added] (pp. 67-68)

Wiesel's account of his loss of faith, his conversion from Judaism to his narrow faith in his own will, appears to be a yardstick by which to measure other movements to deism, agnosticism, or atheism. Do other stories of a loss of faith follow this pattern? Is there a deeper ground in which we can find solace or faith, deeper than the Self? Is conversion to deism, agnosticism, or atheism reinforced by the world we create for ourselves?

To answer these questions and those that follow, it is imperative to use a robust concept of the Self that these questions imply. That concept is Heidegger's (1962) self-aware Being that he calls *Dasein* (translated as *Da*: there, and *Sein*: being; hence, *Being there*). Use of *Dasein* provides a broader sense of Being that exists with others in a co-constructed world filled with multiple points of view. It is precisely the concept of *Dasein* that allows this study to explore the lived experience of religion, because it

implies a mutually reflexive process of engagement between a human being and the life world or even God.⁶

Seeking God in alienation. Baudrillard (1988) says that we have become a transformed society of people and personal spaces set up as simple receivers of information. “We no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks” (p. 16). Like screens and monitors of information, we sit rapt with attention. Even online communities like Wiki and Web 2.0 require that all interaction occur from monitor to monitor and keyboard to keyboard (or a video camera if you have the resources). The human element is continually removed as unnecessary or trite.

And what is the effect of Baudrillard’s sense of our society undergoing an “electronic encephalization” (p. 17)? It directly disrupts our holistic sense of Being. People no longer understand themselves as simply people, but rather as mechanized structures that can be viewed, displayed, poked, and prodded; invaded and totally connected without a sense of distinction, privacy, or silence.

The era of miniaturization, of remote control, and of a microprocessing of time, bodies, and pleasure has come. There is no longer an ideal principle of these things on a human scale. All that remains are miniaturized, concentrated and immediately available effects. This change of scale is discernable everywhere: the human body, our body, seems superfluous in its proper expanse, in the complexity and multiplicity of organs, of its tissue and functions, because today everything is concentrated in the brain and the genetic code, which *alone sum up the operational definition of being*. [emphasis added] (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 18)

⁶ A fuller exploration of *Dasein* is found in Chapter 3.

What does it mean to have so much of Being now defined by something invisible to us? If Being is hidden, even hidden within our own bodies, do people develop a yearning for a visible sense of *Dasein*? What possibilities exist for a re-discovery of Being? How do we uncover what was once lost? Surely, some look to God. But when we are conditioned to experience the world through televisions, networks, and computers, do we develop a truncated sense of what a space inhabited by God would feel like? Have we lost a sense of the proportion of God and what it would mean to choose to stand in God's presence? In seeking conversion, should we be careful what we wish for?

Absence feels like anxiety.

Inhabited space transcends geometrical space. (Bachelard, 1964, p. 47)

Many people of faith yearn for God and long to experience the divine in a direct way, up close and personal. But do we really know what that experience would be like? Should a desire for a personal experience of God be cautioned with the adage, *Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it*. What if God turns out to be everything that our words suggest of God (omnipotent, omnipresent, vast, and unknowable)? What if our words are all too true? To know God, especially from a place of previous unbelief, can be a terrifying experience. Bachelard (1964) asks us to consider the possibility that silent space alone can convey a deep sense of Being, a *personhood* that exists beyond what we understand as persons. In conveying the story of Henri Bosco's (1948) visit to a simple house called *La Redousse* in his book *Malicroix*, Bachelard quotes:

There is nothing like silence to suggest a sense of unlimited space. Sounds lend color to space, and confer a sort of sound body upon it. But absence of sound leaves it quite pure and, in the silence, we are seized with the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless. It took complete

hold of me and, for several moments, I was overwhelmed by the grandeur of this shadowy peace. It asserted itself like a person. This peace had a body. It was caught up in the night, made of night. A real, a motionless body. (pp. 43-44)

Though Bosco speaks of a peace that comes from this “motionless body,” I imagine the peace that Bosco conveys is not altogether a joyful experience. His peace comes with descriptors of being “seized,” “overwhelmed,” and a “shadowy peace” that is “made of night.” Could God be a presence that brings peace and conveys it with a twinge of shadow? What happens when a person is converting towards the light and instead finds something dark? Can a house be a metaphor for the place where God has the most access to that which grips a person’s fear?

Danielewski (2000) explores the possibility of experiencing God this way in his documentary-style, internet-to-print psychological thriller, *House of Leaves*. Told from various narration perspectives, the story revolves around the family of a famous, fictional photojournalist, Will Navidson, and his wife and two children as they move into an unassuming house on “Ash Tree Lane” in suburban Virginia. Navidson and his wife, Karen, move into the house to mend their rocky relationship and provide a comfortable and safe place to raise their children. Navidson never aimed to have conversion be a part of his experience, but it happened anyway.

In the beginning, only the children are sensitive to the unsettling nature of the house. Navidson’s son, Chad, tells his father that he is having trouble sleeping without the typical city noise he used to hear.

“What about the sound of crickets?” Navidson asks. Chad shakes his head. “It’s not the same. I dunno. Sometimes it’s just silent. . . No sound at all.” “Does that scare you?” Chad nods. “Why?” asks his father. “It’s like something’s waiting.” (p. 9)

It strikes me that Chad's reaction to the house is not all that unusual. What is it about silence that can produce a profound sense of peace or an equally profound sense of unease? Though Chad or Navidson do not know it yet, Chad is listening to the vast space that is God. What does it feel like to know that God is "waiting" for us in a very literal sense? Do converts experience God "waiting" for them?

Over time, Navidson soon begins to notice the oddities of his house. When trying to create a very precise wall-to-wall bookshelf, he realizes that either he has made a serious error in calculation, or the wall has mysteriously moved. Finding the latter possibility to be preposterous, he carefully measures the inside and outside of his house, and finds that the outside of his house is slightly smaller than what he measured inside. But how can this be? It defies physical reality and creates a very distinct sense of *unheimlich* (uncanniness) for Navidson and his family. Heidegger (1962) suggests that this uncanniness has embedded within it a deeper purpose or meaning for the *Dasein* that is Navidson. Heidegger says:

Uncanniness reveals itself authentically in the basic state-of-mind of anxiety; and, as the most elemental way in which thrown *Dasein* is disclosed, it puts *Dasein's* Being-in-the-world face to face with the "nothing" of the world: in the face of this "nothing," *Dasein* is anxious with anxiety about its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. *What if this Dasein, which finds itself [sich befindet] in the very depths of its uncanniness, should be the caller of the call of conscience?* [emphasis in original] (p. 321)

House of Leaves perfectly captures Heidegger's notion that *Dasein's* sense of uncanniness creates a deeper questioning of its own Being. Danielewski (2000) capitalizes on Heidegger's *unheimlich* and challenges Navidson's sense of reality, his Being, by placing less than an inch of space in a place where it should not be. Navidson is

turning, but he cannot fully see the conversion yet. He can only sense it. According to Heidegger, this unreality is experienced as a challenge to Being itself. Indeed, Danielewski notes, “The epistemology of the house remains entirely commensurate with its size” (p. 166).

Such a realization begs deeper questions. Does God communicate Being through *unheimlich*? If so, how is it that we can create a sense of peace and connection through *unheimlich*? If someone is converting between religions and finds *unheimlich*, why would someone continue on that path? Why not turn away? And what happens when a small disruption or challenge to *Dasein* widens and grows to something undeniable and terrifying? What happens when we are not confronting less than an inch, but instead find ourselves “confronting vast tenebrific spaces” (Danielewski, 2000, p. 85). And what is the effect on a person when God is no longer experienced as simply far away and indifferent, but as up close, dark and terrifying?

Anxiety or malice? In a short time, Navidson’s home offers a doorway *on an exterior wall* that, when opened, reveals a cold and dark hallway into what should be the outside of the house. This impossible hallway *breathes* cold air and invites investigation into what becomes another unreal space that cannot be: a labyrinthine set of rooms. After calling spelunking professionals, Navidson and company discover that the hallway leads into a maze of rooms with no windows, lights or anything on the walls. The dark “inside” of Navidson’s labyrinth also slowly, but surely, erases the presence of anything left behind. Dust and dirt disappear, the spelunking paint on the walls fades into nothingness, and a constant growl follows these men from within the darkness. To emphasize the point, Danielewski (2000) himself quotes Bachelard’s (1964) insight that “The dreamer

in his corner wrote off the world in a detailed daydream that destroyed, one by one, all the objects in the world” (Bachelard, p. 143; Danielewski, p. 333). This is God, but not the version of God anyone learned about in Sunday school. Instead, this God is dark and menacing. Heidegger (1962) gives a sense of what such a dark presence might mean to someone experiencing it. He says:

Anxiety can arise in the most innocuous Situations. Nor does it have any need for darkness, in which it is commonly easier for one to feel uncanny. In the dark there is emphatically “nothing” to see, though the very world itself is *still* “there,” and “there” *more obtrusively*. (p. 234)

Heidegger’s quote makes clear that the dark is not merely *in the way*, like an inactive speedbump. The dark is there and “obtrusive.”

The word “obtrusive” comes from the Latin *obtrudere*, where the root *trudere* is the nominate of the words “thrust” and “threat.” To be obtrusive is not a passive state of being. Rather, it is an active *thrust* that implies a very real *threat*. Heidegger makes clear that the dark of God may be the essence of commination, a menacing presence that punishes. Given this possibility, would a potential convert continue on or leave? Would the answer to the previous question paradoxically be based on rationality or a non-rational belief in God? Truthfully, I suspect that most people would leave, but not all. Navidson is drawn in toward this dark God. His conversion is one that leans into darkness.

Eventually Navidson and his professional crew discover that within his small, suburban home exists several vast, cold, dark spaces within the labyrinth. “The Infinite Corridor, the Anteroom, the Great Hall, and the Spiral Staircase, exist for all, though their

respective size and even layout sometimes changes” (p. 178). And within the Great Hall, Jed, one of the crew members, tries to describe the Spiral Staircase:

It was enormous. We dropped a few flares down it but never heard them hit bottom. I mean in that place, it being so empty and cold and still and all, you really can hear a pin drop, but the darkness just swallowed the flares, right up. (p. 85)

Faced with such spatial impossibilities (that once began with an irregularity under an inch), it is not a stretch to see that the story lingers on notions of God. Having lost most of his professional crew to the growl in the darkness, Navidson confronts the possibility that God exists in the form of his house and that he is powerless to deny that possibility.

He has converted. In an exchange with his wife, Navidson says:

I’m starting to see that place for what it is, and it’s not for cable shows or National Geographic. Do you believe in God? I don’t think I ever asked you that one. Well I do now. But my God isn’t your Catholic varietal or your Judaic or Mormon or Baptist or Seventh Day Adventist or whatever/whoever. No burning bush, no angels, no cross. God’s a house. Which is not to say that our house is God’s house or even a house of God. What I mean to say is that our house *is* God. (p. 390)

What does it feel like to imagine that God is very near, almost too near? Though Danielewski’s (2000) book is a work of fiction, it powerfully conveys the sense of dread that one must feel before something or someone completely out of reach and incomprehensible, often described as Otto’s (1950) *Mysterium Tremendum*. Navidson decides to make one last journey into the dark expanse of the Great Hall and the Spiral Staircase in the middle, not to find his crew, whom he knows are lost forever, but to confront the possibility of God within that space. And like a modern-day prophet, he takes a video camera to record his underworld journey into the bowels of his house. But

the house, God, is waiting for him. As he steps onto the Spiral Staircase, it expands so fast that Navidson falls into the pit. He falls to his end in the frightening heart of God. Afterwards, the house delivers the video recorder back to the normal part of the house where we learn what a final descent into God might look like:

“I know I’m falling and will soon slam into the bottom. I feel it, rushing up at me.” But he can only live with this fear for so long before he recognizes: “I won’t even know when I finally do hit. I’ll be dead before I can realize anything’s happened. So there is no bottom. It does not exist for me. Only my end exists.” And then in a whisper: “Maybe that is the *something* here. The only thing here. My end.” Navidson records his sobs and groans. He even captures moments of faint amusement when he jokingly announces: “It’s not fair in a way. I’ve been falling down so long it feels like floating up to me—” Soon though he grows less concerned about where he is and becomes more consumed by who he once was. Unlike Floyd Collins, Navidson does not rave about angels in chariots or chicken sandwiches. Nor does he offer us his C.V. like Holloway. Instead, as urea pours into his veins and delirium sets in, Navidson begins rambling on about people he has known and loved: Tom—“Tom... Tom, is this where you went? Don’t look down, eh?” —Delial, his children and more and more frequently Karen— “I’ve you. I’ve lost you.” ...“Don’t be scared.” “Don’t be.” “I am.” Finally, Navidson’s words, tunes, and shivering murmurs trail off into a painful rasp. He knows his voice will never heat this world. Perhaps no voice will. Memories cease to surface. Sorrow threatens to no longer matter. Navidson is forgetting. Navidson is dying. Very soon he will vanish completely in the wings of his own wordless stanza. Except this stanza does not remain entirely empty. “Light,” Navidson croaks. “Can’t. Be. I see light. Care—” Sure enough the final frames of Navidson’s film capture the upper right-hand corner a tiny fleck of blue crying light into the void. Enough to see but not enough to see by. The film runs out. Black. A different kind of black. (pp. 472-489)

But why did Navidson go back into the labyrinth? In *House of Leaves*, God refuses Its⁷ presence and leaves a frightening absence. For what purpose would someone delve into that absence? Why convert to emptiness? Though the story is not explicit about this possibility, Navidson's conversation with himself, and the vast space, regarding his failed relationships indicates a kind of penance or atonement. Is atonement a kind of conversion? What role does extreme fear play in conversion? The term "propitiate" comes from the Latin *propitiare*, meaning to "ease or assuage a God" or to make "favorable, gracious." Could it be that the "blue crying light" is the answer God has for that atonement? Does it indicate a favorable response to Navidson's own sacrifice, the ultimate conversion where one gives entirely of oneself? Ultimately, we never know or find out. We are only left with the mystery that God, as a house, is bigger on the inside than the outside, where the larger is received into the smaller. A kenotic God creates space for us so that we are allowed to *be*, but that process may be anything but blissful. Perhaps it is precisely fear that allows God to remind us that a larger Other can exist *within* a smaller Self.

After considering the effect of a deeply present and absent God on a person's faith, it is also helpful to return to the previous quote of Freire (2000). Without communication, Freire asserts that we are reduced to the status of a thing. As revealed above, even the darkest and most extreme communication with God conveys the preservation of a person's status as a person. It preserves and draws faith in *Dasein*. For a person of faith, these experiences may not always be pleasant, but they reaffirm a sense

⁷ Given the nature of the story, the use of a gender pronoun does not seem to make sense here.

of humanity nevertheless. For the convert, communication in any form becomes a promise of actually finding what we seek.

Human and God in a Technological Relationship

Despite the intense fear of God, people continue to seek out the divine. If the possibility of God is so terrifying, why not avoid God? In his poem, *Prayer*, Harrison (2009) illustrates that selfish desires will likely overcome the fear of God described through Danielewski's (2000) house.

Are all of those wrongful prayers gumming
up the skies like smog over Los Angeles?
We may never stop making a special case for ourselves.
May the Coyotes kill the Lobos in the Regional Finals.
The lottery would be nice. Bring my dead child back to life.
May the weather clear for the church picnic on Saturday.
Let Christina be my true love not Bob's or Ralph's.
May we destroy all terrorist countries except the children.
In France the sun through stained-glass windows quilted
the sanctuary with the faint rose light of Jesus' blood.
10,000 different asses, clutched in fear, sat on these pews.
Perhaps planes fly holes in all our stalled prayers,
and birds migrate through them as they rise up
or down toward the ninety billion galaxies we know of,
those seeds of the gods in this endlessly flowering universe.
As a child I prayed in my hiding place beneath the roots
of an overturned tree that the sight would return to my
blind eye.
The sight is only enough to see the moon,
the rising sun, the blur of stars. (p. 17)

Harrison's poem strikes me as very insightful to the motivation for conversion, a need or desire that exists beyond the control of an individual person. To fulfill that desire, a person requires a supernatural ally. I am particularly drawn to the image of the French sanctuary where "10,000 different asses, clutched in fear, sat on these pews." Harrison connects the behavior of coming to church with fear. I wonder whether some of those fearful persons have come for the first time? Do they convert, literally *turn*, to God

because they fear something else more immediately than God? It appears that prayer can be a medium for communion or a vehicle through which we place an order for our daily desire. Harrison's poem makes me wonder whether God may feel like my mother, who challenged me to renegotiate my relationship with her when I was in college. She told me that she likes to receive an occasional phone call just to check in, without a request for something. When I reflected on my own behavior in college, I realized that I needed to change. I converted into a more mature person with a more adult relationship with my mother. By being aware of the constant prayers for our own desires, do people convert to a new understanding of themselves or of religion? Why do people pray seeking a divine Santa Claus instead of simply seeking God? How do we distinguish the former kind of seeking from the latter when uncovering conversion?

Harrison's poem about humanity's prayers suggests that God exists in a way that conveys a centering of humanity, even in the *purpose* of God. In this sense, we have embedded within any human relationship with God a sense of Heidegger's (1977b) technology. How does a human engage with God through the concept of technology? Heidegger says:

We ask the question concerning technology when we ask what it is. One says: Technology is a means to an end. The other says: Technology is a human activity. The two definitions of technology belong together. For to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity. (p. 4)

With this sense of technology in mind, God, then, exists for *our* sake, as a divine means to very human ends. I am aware of how blasphemous this can sound, but it also has a ring of truth within it, despite its overtones of sacrilege. Why else would people seek God, if not for some human end? Can we really ever know God for Her/His/Its own sake?

Religious becoming makes use of God. Radosh (2008) tells a story of a time he went to a Christian rock concert in Kansas by Krystal Meyers, whom he calls the “Christian Avril Lavigne” (p. 137). He mentions this concert to illustrate the uninterrogated *purpose* that Christianity holds for many of its teen-age adherents and converts. In a conversation with his sister about the concert, Radosh says:

I mentioned being baffled by her hit song *Anticonformity*, but later I looked up the lyrics and I could kind of see her point. “Pressure from my so called friends, I’m measured by some stupid trend, Everyone is just like them, So I’m anticonformity.” That’s not to say there’s no—let’s call it paradox—in a rebellion based on obedience to the Bible. A few months after that first concert I got to see Meyers play again at a larger festival. When she got to her big hit, she announced, “Now I want everybody to scream as loud as you can: *Anticonformity! Anticonformity!*” And without the slightest hint of irony, eight thousand arm-waving fans chanted *anticonformity* in perfect unison. (p. 137)

Radosh illustrates that for these teen-age fans, the message of becoming a Christian is not necessarily for God or Christ. Rather, Christianity and God become a vehicle for a different form of conforming that parades as rebellion. To become a Christian teen is to engage with God to obtain something of personal utility (group membership, a voice for rebellion, etc.), rather than simple communion. How am I to understand what this kind of conversion means? What is qualitatively different about seeking God for our own sake rather than God’s intent?

Heidegger (1977b) suggests that Being has a very technological relationship with humanity, because of the necessity to bring Being itself about. But what is the Being that is brought about, and why is humanity necessary to it? Is the *bringing about* implying that conversion is a constant, necessary process? It is in the essence of a technological

relationship to imbue a sense of *utility from the perspective of human usefulness*.

Heidegger describes this relationship through several examples:

A tract of land is challenged into the putting out of coal and ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order [*bestellte*] appears differently than it did *when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain*. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of *another kind of setting-in-order, which sets upon [stellt] nature*. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry... The sun's warmth is challenged forth for heat, which in turn is ordered to deliver steam whose pressure turns the wheels that keep a factory running. [emphasis added] (pp. 14-15)

In Heidegger's estimation, modern humanity has developed a relationship with everything that is seen through the lens of technology, a desire for creating order to the utility of humanity's purpose. Is it such a stretch to see that God serves a similar purpose and lives in a similar relationship with humans today? How would a relationship with God change one's course of action or mindset if religious practice and experience were focused on a desire to "take care of and to maintain" God, as people once did with the land? In what kind of new "setting-in-order" do we yolk God, and any notion of the divine, for our own purposes? Do converts seek God for their own purposes or to find what was simply absent before?

A clue to our modern technological yearning toward God can be seen in the initial passages of the Simon and Garfunkel (1970) song, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, that has often been imagined as a song God might sing to a human in distress.

When you're weary
 Feeling small
 When tears are in your eyes
 I will dry them all

I'm on your side
 When times get rough
 And friends just can't be found
 Like a bridge over troubled water
 I will lay me down
 (Simon & Garfunkel, 1970)

This song is powerful, because many people find this song deeply comforting and assuring of a higher power willing to intervene on behalf of human need, particularly the overt Christian message of needing to be saved. Though I doubt Simon and Garfunkel intended to convey a technological relationship with God, such a relationship is clearly visible. In this song, God's clear *purpose* is to "lay me down" in the way of a useful thing, a bridge. Heidegger (1977b) expresses a deeper concern for this kind of relationship with the divine. He says:

Thus where everything that presences exhibits itself in the light of a cause-effect coherence, even God can, for representational thinking, lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance. In the light of causality, God can sink to the level of a cause, of *causa efficiens*. He then becomes, even in theology, the god of the philosophers, namely, of those who define the unconcealed and the concealed in terms of causality or making, without ever considering the essential origin of this causality. (p. 26)

The quote is crucial in understanding a potential *motivation* for religious conversion. Is conversion motivated for God's behalf or a person's own behalf? Can a person truly be anything other than self interested, particularly when even a sincere person has to start somewhere? Yet the deeper question remains: Is the religious life lived for God or for oneself? Cantwell Smith (1991) previously suggests that understanding the

religious life of a person requires intensive scrutiny into the faith that person possesses.

Heidegger's commentary above adds the wisdom that the motivation of a person's faith is equally important in understanding the larger picture of religion, and thus, religious conversion.

Silent witness to humanity. In addition to the perspectives described above, I like to think that divinity may hold a simple purpose that may exist in between those I have explored. Perhaps God serves only as a witness to what we do, silent like Navidson's house, but also providing a soothing role for humanity's existence. Perhaps God is simply a witness to a person's life, and conversion exists to *choose the kind of witness* best suited to the experience a person brings forward. Selzer (1998) describes the experience of being a witness in a story of the same title, *Witness*. As a physician, Selzer tells the story of a husband and wife who bring in their son who has, in addition to a severe mental disability, acute pain related to an undescended testicle. Though the story describes the testicle itself as a witness to the boy's pain, I am also captivated by the witnessing the father has for his son, in a way that I see as similar to that which people of faith imagine God has for humanity. Upon completion of the surgery to remove the testicle, Selzer relates the news of the successful operation to the father who experiences relief, but continued pain at his son's condition. Selzer says:

All at once, I know that this man's love for his child is a passion. It is a rapids roiling within him. It has nothing to do with pleasure, this kind of love. It is a deep, black joy.
(p. 346)

Selzer's story implies that to witness means to bear some kind of pain, a cost that would not be there without the relationship. There is a cost to God also, implying that pain and suffering have a purpose in establishing bonds of connection and fealty. In seeking a new

religion, does a convert seek an image of God that conveys a sense of bearing pain, perhaps the convert's pain? Do seekers want a silent, but attentive, God? How does a convert know which kind of witness is required? If witnessing is the only requirement of the divine, does it matter which religion a convert chooses?

And for those who see the role of witness as much more dispassionate, perhaps as a deist orientation, O'Brien's (1998) recollection of the Vietnam War provides the personification of a perfectly neutral observer/witness in the person of Elroy Berdahl, the owner of a small cabin/motel near the Canadian border. This person serves as a non-judging context or frame in which O'Brien can work out the moral crisis he sets forth. This context is so important that Berdahl is viewed in impersonal, and yet, divine terms.

He was simply there, like the river and the late-summer sun. And yet by his presence, his mute watchfulness, he made it real. He was the true audience. He was a witness, like God, or like the gods, who look on in absolute silence as we live our lives, as we make our choices or fail to make them. (p. 61)

Perhaps this quote best exemplifies what God's silence and refusal of presence means, and that how any single person experiences it is quite individual in nature.

Does God "look on in absolute silence," where humanity projects desires, fears, limitations, and other human understandings on God? What meaning does conversion have when God is simply an observer? Again, why do people seek God at all? What is the overall sense of faith's relationship to a God that is distant, silent, terrifying, and/or technically useful? And if we convert from one faith orientation to another, is it simply a change in our reaction to an other-worldly presence that itself never really changes? It seems that faith is a process that tells us much more about ourselves than about the nature of God. If people change their faith, intentionally or otherwise, does God react? And

when a person has converted, how is the universe different? It would appear that the new religion would provide a sense that the universe is more knowable and understandable.

Certainty: Knowing Despite Our Limitations

To hold to God is to rely on the fact that God is there for me, and to live in this certainty. (Barth, 1959, p. 19)

When I came across the quote above by Barth, I instantly remembered Carravaggio's painting *Doubting Thomas*, where Thomas is literally sticking his finger in the wound of Christ, skeptical of Christ's resurrection. How is it that some people repeatedly engage in religion with little to no proof of God (and simultaneously maintaining a feeling of sureness that God exists for them in a very personal way), while others, like Thomas, might never believe, even with an incarnate divinity that allows full physical access into the form of God? Are there ingredients to certitude that can be discerned? Does a desire for certainty lure converts? Do our own limitations, particularly the fact of our mortality, encourage a sense of credulity that might not otherwise exist? I explore these questions below and consider that the lure of conversion may lie in the way we conceive of God's omnipotence.

Being Sure: God Provides Order

Because the phenomenon of conversion is so linked to the gaining or losing of a sense of certitude in the existence and form of God, I wish to explore its roots at length. Below is an exploration of where sureness in the divine may arise and the subsequent implications this sureness has on conversion, particularly whether one subscribes to a religion focused on Cantwell Smith's (1991) "historical traditions" or the "personal faith of men and women."

Us versus them.

I know in my heart that my fundamentalist faith is giving me structure and purpose. (S. Campbell, 2009, p. 138)

When Campbell (2009) recalls her awkward adolescence and her mother's new marriage, she notices that a desire for certainty in the world draws her back to church in an earnest way. She is seeking a place where her world is orderly, safe, and provides absolute answers to complex questions, and fundamentalist Christianity provides just that. She remarks:

The uncertainty at home sends me swimming fast to the nearest port I can find, the one constant, church, which, things being what they are, now means my stepfather's church. This is not the relatively benign Christian church to which I have become accustomed, but a hard-backed, two-fisted faith that will ask everything of me. There will be no pageants, no opportunities for theatrical stage glory. And I decide that I love my new church... The failure of my parents' marriage and the onerous presence of my stepfather are pushed aside in those walls... I don't understand what is happening, but I feel safe. (pp. 61-62)

In essence, Campbell converts to safety, but gets more than what she imagined. Along with the safety comes an unrelenting perspective that outsiders are evil. Does conversion for safety necessitate defining an outsider as other? Do converts desire a clear line between members within the community and those outside the community to feel a sense that they have actually left their previous faith?

One possible explanation for this dynamic is best represented by Durkheim's (2001) seminal work on the rational and ongoing nature of religion derived through a lens of social organization and expression, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Durkheim suggests that there is a *very rational* purpose to religion (as understood as the above "binding" social force) beyond naturalism and animism (which he describes as

“delusional,” but I do not believe are perfectly mutually exclusive) or even personal experience. This vision of religion, deriving its meaning through the structures it creates, provides a cosmogony that justifies the social location of every individual in the society in a single moral community. Do people desire a “single moral community” to make sense of their conversion experience? Perhaps this is so, because this form of religion also tacitly defines everything that is *not* within this moral community. Thus, Durkheim (2001) defines religion as follows:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.
(p. 46)

And to represent this religion (or God) to itself, Durkheim’s moral community identifies with a particular symbol, a totem, that fully expresses the meaning of the moral community. Through mechanisms of *shibboleth*, the community is circumscribed to those who also share affinity to the totem, and the place defined for them by this totem.

Durkheim (2001) says of the religious totem:

So if the totem is both the symbol of god and of society, are these not one and the same? How could the group’s emblem become the face of this quasi-divinity if the group and the divinity were two distinct realities? The god of the clan, the totemic principle, must therefore be the clan itself, but transfigured and imagined in the physical form of the plant or animal species that serve as totems. (p. 154)

Durkheim’s totem clearly provides a *certain* understanding of the divine through a socially naturalized demarcation of those associated with the totem (us) and those who are not (them), also understood as sacred and profane. But Durkheim did not use the terms *sacred* or *profane* as synonymous with *good* or *evil*. Rather, these terms were used

to distinguish between social classes in their nearness to the totemic holiness and to legitimate that distinction. In this sense, “profane” comes from the Latin *profanes*, meaning “uninitiated” or “before the temple” (*pro*-before and *fanus*-temple). Thus, the profane was merely a system of describing that which is ordinary (such as the difference between totemic insiders to persons outside of the community). This insight from Durkheim raises questions about the desire for conversion. Does conversion imply a desire to be extra-ordinary in a world where ordinary is not valued? Is the *us versus them* dynamic a necessary condition in providing a convert with certainty of place in the world? What happens if a convert becomes “initiated” to the totem, but finds the space unwelcoming once within it? Does that person then convert again, away from the new religion?

Conversion back: Becoming profane. When Campbell (2009) finally found herself within a safe religious community, she received overt messages that the simple fact of her femaleness meant that she was profane, even within the church. She was expected to accept the secondary status of women in the church as natural, and any challenge to that order would be sanctioned. To question this order is to question the order that that God had provided for His church. Thus, those deemed profane are explicitly not to question the totemic order that places them in an inferior status, because it disrupts all understanding of social location. Campbell did so anyway. For example, she seeks to see Mary Magdalene in a new light:

Mary Magdalene’s “demons” might have been anger and resentment that a society denied her the opportunity to give and to lead... Instead, we are told she was a prostitute—a concept found nowhere in the Bible. If we make her sexually suspect, we know where to put her. In reality, Mary Magdalene, known as the “sweet friend of God,”

followed Jesus to the grave, and she appeared to have continued preaching after his death, in what is now France.
(p. 122)

In return for her new attitude, Campbell receives *ecclesiastical* warning.

I choose the term *ecclesia* to describe the social and political organization that exists around, and permeates through, religious experience, because of the deeply embedded sense of power and domination that the name implies. *Ecclesia* comes from the ancient Greek term *ekkletos* that defines a “public assembly of citizens” with the power to “*hold or summon* to an assembly” [emphasis added]. Though also has been used to describe those called forth by God to a new order, I suggest that its derivative sense of the institutional church has arguably eclipsed its previous meaning, indicating that religion is no longer merely an organizing principle on which to establish social relationships, but additionally defines the *power* of the dominant caste. Acting as a parhelion of the divine, this collective has embedded within it (by definition) the ability to “summon forth,” presumably for the purpose of approving or castigating the summoned. Perhaps the prime, though by no means the only, example of the exercise of ecclesiastical authority would have to be the promulgations of the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church, in the form of interdicts, encyclicals, and excommunications. Though these terms and the roots of these terms denotatively appear benign (with root meanings such as the use of speech and defining community), common language and experience has connotatively associated these denotative terms with a darker connotative heading: fulmination. To understand its *ecclesiastical* nature, one need only delve into the common dictionary. Webster’s (1828) definition for fulminate in his first dictionary is “to utter or send out, as a denunciation or censure; to

send out, as a menace or censure, by ecclesiastical authority.” To illustrate, the term *fulminate* comes from the Latin root *fulmin* meaning “lightning” or to “thunder forth.” It stands to reason that a body conceiving itself as a representative of God would use the metaphoric equivalent of lightning to strike down its adversaries, internal or external. What is it like to be on the receiving end of ecclesia’s wrath? What is the price to be paid for questioning? To what religion can a person of faith convert when the conversion implies disgrace and leaving one’s family behind?

For Campbell (2009), she ceased being a fundamentalist Christian when she found that her intellectual resistance to the oppression of women in the church was becoming strictly and physically enforced at home. The church that had created a zone of safety around her now opened up a new perilous world of womanhood. Campbell describes the encounter she had with her mother who asked her to prepare one meal a week. Campbell agreed to take up the task, but also asked which meals her brothers would prepare. She describes the result of her encounter (in third person):

It is a fine eruption, and one that ends with the handprint of her mother—in red—marked firmly on her left cheek... The girl-child runs up to the stairs to her bedroom, slams the door, and comes down only for dinner—prepared by her tired and angry mother, who thought to let this one night slide... She takes to wandering the neighborhood until it is far past dark and she knows that her mother has tired of waiting for her and is right now slamming pots in the kitchen to prepare something for her hungry menfolk... Eventually, of course, our princess disappears for so many nights that she wears her parents down, and she never touches a pot unless she wants to, which she rarely does. (pp. 100-101)

In that period of “wandering the neighborhood until it is far past dark,” Campbell becomes profane, an ordinary, unruly woman who is not doing her Christian duty. She

converts, but never overtly calls it that, embracing feminism and putting fundamentalism away. Is there a sense of freedom that comes with the state of being profane? Does being on the receiving end of religious censure count as conversion? It appears that an exclusive religious identity, when stripped away, makes life less certain, but provides an opening to new identities as well.

Having explored the way certainty or sureness of religious experience comes about for day-to-day experiences, it is also useful to consider how crisis might affect the feeling of religious certainty. I can think of no other human experience than death to disrupt what people think they believe, and the sureness with which they believe it. And if sureness can be disrupted, perhaps its disruption uncovers the possibility for conversion.

***Dasein* is Transcendent Through Death**

If there is a turning involved in religious conversion, I can clearly understand the purposeful turning *away* that may be prompted by the death of a dear family member. No one is an asphodel, living forever in beauty. People know this intellectually, but I wonder how many of us *know* this in a more visceral sense, having witnessed death, up close and first hand? The death of my grandmother was a turning unlike any other I had experienced in the past, and it had a very real impact on my own religious conversion. Heidegger (1977c) offers insight into how that turning takes place and what singular moments of meaning exist in such a powerful turning. Heidegger first notes that:

The coming to presence of Being will so turn itself that, with this turning, the truth of the coming to presence of Being will expressly *turn in—turn homeward—*into whatever is. [emphasis added] (p. 41)

Heidegger notes that in the midst of turning, Being seeks first to root itself in the experience as *Dasein* experiences it. That observation makes sense. Yet, I think that the addition of a turn “homeward” in this quote is much more interesting and promises insight into what a turn provides.

In the midst of confronting death, what is it that “homeward” offers a person? What is the *home* in which conversion occurs? Naturally, there is a sense of comfort, but there is also a deep grounding in the midst of an unmooring experience. Perhaps “homeward” refers to the sense of solid safety that *home* offers our unconscious selves? And once we have grounded ourselves, what do we find at *home*? What happens when we confront death from the space of *home*? Do we find ourselves challenging the allegedly just nature of God from the perceived safety of our *homes*?

Home Illuminates Death

Once grounded, home provides more than a place of safe retreat for *Dasein*. In the space of home, *Dasein* is given the space to remember itself and the broader Being to which it is connected. Can this connection to Being prompt a reconsideration of religion? It is precisely in those moments of re-membling, in the sense of becoming a member of Being once more in a conscious way, *Dasein* finds insight into the meaning of death. Heidegger (1977c) carefully describes this process through a metaphor of a lightning-flash:

The turning of the danger comes to pass suddenly. In this turning, the clearing belonging to the essence of Being suddenly clears itself and lights up. This sudden self-lighting is the lightning-flash. It brings itself into its own brightness, which it itself both brings along and brings in. When, in the turning of the danger, the truth of Being flashes, the essence of Being clears and lights itself up.

Then the truth of the essence, the coming to presence, of
Being turns and enters in. (p. 44)

Conversion is similar to this lightning flash in that it briefly illuminates that which was hidden or overlooked. When safely perched in a home space, what is revealed? What does *Dasein* see during the brief glimpse of the lightning flash? From my own experience, when the crisis of death occurs, reconsidering religion resurrects the specters of our religious past and haunts us with them. *Dasein* must confront religion once more. I had to confront Mormonism once again. Where did my loved one go? Do the dead simply cease to exist? Do I simply want to believe that my grandmother has gone to a better place, perhaps a futile attempt to ease my deepest fears, those fears that even being at home cannot perfectly quell? Though I thought I had it all figured out, death was a presence that I could not easily intellectualize away. Death rallies fears to the surface and forces humanity to consider the *possibility* that our existence may not end when our body ceases to function.

Perhaps death forces us back, asking us to consider our own Being in relation to the person we just lost. If I thought that everything that defined my grandmother as a person had simply vanished, then *what does that say about my own being?* Religion typically has an answer for that question, but is it satisfying? Does it ring true? Do I need to search for something else? Do I need new words for what happens after death? What does the context of grieving and dealing with death do to our entire concept of Being? Ultimately, what am I, and what are we for? A poem by Rilke (2005) gives an unusual insight into the meaning of death from an odd vantage point, the experience God might have upon a person's death. Rilke writes:

What will you do, God, when I die?

I am your pitcher (when I shatter?)
 I am your drink (when I go bitter?)
 I, your garment; I, your craft.
 Without me what reason have you

Without me what house
 where intimate words await you?
 I, velvet sandal that falls from your foot.
 I, cloak dropping from your shoulder.

Your gaze, which I welcome now
 as it warms my cheek,
 will search for me, hour after hour
 and lie at sunset, spent,
 on an empty beach
 among unfamiliar stones

What will you do, God? It troubles me. (p. 95)

Rilke's poem indicates that death does demand an answer, and that its meaning is deeply intertwined with the meaning people make of their lives. The moment of death allows the Heideggerian "lightning flash" to remind the living that perhaps *we live for others*, especially if *even God* needs us to *be*.

Within the poem *Palingenesis*, Hölderlin (2004) echoes this sentiment by suggesting that it is precisely our ability to see beyond ourselves that compels us to seek meaning outside of ourselves. Hölderlin writes:

Yet in the man a god has his dwelling, too,
 so that he sees what is past and to come and
 as from the river up into the mountain range
 he rambles to the source through the ages. (p. 111)

Thus, death becomes more than a moment of grieving, and grows into an opportunity to enter the quietest places of our Being to uncover memories of relationship that imbue life with meaning. Death provides us the occasion for the insight that the divine may be reminding us of our own divinity. Is recognizing this sublime insight a conversion?

The Good of God's Limits

The Master said, "I am thinking of giving up speech." Tzu-kung said, "If you did not speak, what would there be for us, your juniors to transmit?" The Master said, "What does Heaven ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being. What does Heaven ever say?" — (*Analects of Confucius*, Book XVII, Stanza 19, p. 177)

Though it may strike at the heart of how many Western people define God, perhaps the best comfort and sureness one can experience of God comes from the notion that God may *not* be all powerful, and that may be a good thing. Do some people desire a God that is equally constrained by rules of order and justice? Would a person rationally choose a limited God versus an omnipotent God? This certainly makes sense if a person experiences God as occasionally vindictive or capricious. The quote by Confucius above suggests that the Chinese Heaven operates on ontological rules that require no explanation, purpose, or origin. Rather, these rules simply *are* and create the space for other beings to Be. Within that system of ordering, Eastern conceptions of God are always subordinated to a deeper sense of order and purpose. Reflections on Heidegger's (1962) conceptual differences between ontic and ontological (where *ontological* is an *a priori* ordering of Being that gives rise to a logical successor, that which is *ontic*) suggest that I consider the possibility of a distinction between an ontic (Western) and ontological (non-Western) God (pp. 32-35).

In Hughart's (1998) fictional story *Bridge of Birds*, it is the ontic God that must bow to the ontological rules of Heaven. Master Li and Number Ten Ox's *August Personage of Jade* is a literary expression of the idea that God is majestic and divine, but still constrained by the rules of heaven. The story describes a fictional China that contains

a strikingly different concept of God that is very much in alignment with Heidegger's theology where the holy exists prior to God and imbues God with meaning. This account suggests that a great wrong has to be made right (in bringing the *Princess of Birds* back to the *Star Shepherd* in the sky), but the *August Personage of Jade*, also known as the Heavenly Emperor, *cannot* simply decree it. Rather, the heavenly figure must operate within rules and restrictions that exist in Heaven beyond even His control.

Working Within the Bounds of Heaven

It does not mean that the Emperor is impotent and without power. He eventually brings the forces of Heaven together to solve the problem, but does so in a very political way. Does this description of God feel more accessible to a potential convert? Does it bring comfort to know that God has to follow rules as well? Procedure is followed and order is maintained. Hughart suggests that even the *August Personage of Jade* cannot simply decree the story's villain to eternal damnation without consent of the Yama Kings (other divine figures that protect order and represent elemental powers). In an example of the punishment befitting a cruel, immortal tyrant, Hughart (1998) illustrates:

The Duke of Ch'in murdered those poor girls, and then bound them with a spell that would force them to defend the heart of their murderer. Since he fully intends to live forever, he has sentenced three innocent girls to eternal damnation. [Master Li] was so angry that he was turning purple. "Not even the Emperor of Heaven has the right to sentence anyone to eternal damnation!" he said furiously. "There must be a trial, and the accused must be defended, and the Yama Kings must concur in the verdict before such a terrible sentence can be imposed!" (p. 204)

In other words, is Heidegger's *field of the holy* one thing or many things in collective that form and collaboratively shape what it means to be holy? This representation of a limited God raises a fascinating question. Is it this limiting of God that assures order in the

universe, rather than the other way around? How does this affect the choices one might make of religion?

I often wonder if the Mormons of my past might secretly desire a God that has limits, because such a belief supports their theology that faithful Mormons might become gods or goddesses through a pre-ordained order of divinity. Would it be a rational conversion to worship God as the Heavenly Chinese Emperor who maintains the rules, rather than a more Western God who decrees the order of things by fiat, particularly if this assured a deeper sense of place and justice in the universe? Is that really happening in the Western scenario anyway? This picture of God reminds me of the logic of divided government in democracy. The executive does not make the rules, but enforces them and makes good use of them for positive outcomes. But what then serves the function of the heavenly legislature? Who makes the rules? Is it a collection of representatives of existence? Regardless of the answers to these questions, this conception of God may bring comfort to those who seek sureness in their world. A limited God may be very appealing to a potential convert. Having considered the various roles that faith and certainty play in conversion, I next consider the crucial role that a sense of belonging plays in the process as well.

Belonging: The Obligation of Connectedness

The world of *Dasein* is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is *Being-with* Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is *Dasein-with* [*Mitdasein*]. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 155)

To this point in the study, religious experience and conversion have touched on ideas of faith, the nearness or distance of God, the need for certainty, connection to spirit, longing, God's power, and even the fear of death. All of the preceding concepts are

possible starting points for conversion. But my own experience also lends itself to a much closer, and perhaps simpler, motivation: the human need for a sense of community.

Heidegger's (1962) quote above indicates that the essence of our Being must always be measured in relation to others around us. To explore conversion closely through the lens of *communitas*, I explore the nature of Heidegger's (1962) *Being-with* and provide several examples from a preliminary study of religious conversion.⁸

The Need of Being-With

Despite Heidegger's philosophical complexity, there is one concept that he explores at length that is very accessible and useful for this study, the sense that *Dasein* is not an entity that can exist entirely unto itself. So concerned was Heidegger with the idea that Being arises through interdependent relationships, that he suggests that *Dasein must itself be an entire world* to encompass the possibilities inherent in direct contact with another *Dasein*. Heidegger (1962) says:

Dasein's world frees entities which not only are quite distinct from equipment and Things, but which also—in accordance with their kind of Being *as Dasein* themselves—are “in” the world in which they are at the same time encountered within-the-world, and are “in” it by way of Being-in-the-world. These entities are neither present-at-hand nor ready-to-hand; on the contrary, they are like the very *Dasein* which frees them, in that *they are there too, and there with it*. So if one should want to identify the world in general with entities within-the-world, one would have to say that *Dasein* too is “world.” Thus in characterizing the encountering of Others, one is again still oriented by that *Dasein* which is in each case one's own.
(p. 154)

⁸ This unpublished preliminary study on the phenomenon of religious conversion was conducted under the direction of Dr. Francine Hultgren in spring 2006. Passages are brought forward here.

In being an entire world in which another *Dasein* enters and moves through, *Dasein* frees itself and the Others it encounters. Is this why humanity is drawn to itself? Do we have the capacity to open new possibilities to Others by simply creating room for them in ourselves? Do we exist in this kind of relation with God? In considering these questions, it is important to note that Heidegger (1962) has a very important caveat to consider. He says:

By “Others” we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the “I” stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too. (p. 154)

In creating room for another *Dasein* (a world of room), it is important to recognize that a reciprocal experience is involved where *Dasein* opens itself to its own freedom by being called into the world of the Other *Dasein*, by belonging to the Other in a way that is a recognition of mutual liberation that is created when belonging is present. But where is conversion to be found in the meeting of worlds? Does the liberation found in these worlds provide the space for *Dasein* to convert? How does one *Dasein* encounter connection with another? In this metaphysical world, spatial terms provide a sense of *where* belonging exists and the body’s role in bringing it about. Heidegger is suggesting that multiple *Daseins* stand with each other in this mutually created, overlapping world, seeking belonging. But where are they relative to one another?

The word “belong” comes from the Old Saxon term *langen* meaning to “desire, extend, and offer.” German and English derivatives of *langen* further imbue a sense of “reaching,” and “yearning desire.” These etymological roots suggest that belonging requires a closing of distance that is not through accident or circumstance alone. Instead, belonging requires the fulfillment of a need to be with others, a proactive move toward

another, and a yearning that is actualized. Further still, to be “proximal” to an-Other indicates that belonging contains within it a steady and sure progression of movement from one to another. “Proximal” comes from the Latin *proximus* which has multiple meanings that range from “near,” to “approaching,” and even up to “attached.” To be proximal, within a greater state of belonging, suggests that the bodies may ultimately become “attached” in an intimate union. Does a conversion imply an intimate union with another? Which *other* is implied? Likewise, the opposite term “distal,” and its etymological cousin “distance,” provide more meaning. Both come from the Latin root *distans* that suggest deeper meanings of “dischord” and “dissension” in addition to the physical meaning of “remoteness.” These spatial words indicate that our bodies know when we are brought, or more likely, intentionally bring ourselves into the fold of another and that this joining or belonging produces the sense of a natural state. In proximal belonging, *Dasein* encounters another *Dasein*, freeing each other’s Being, and creating harmony between the two.

Giving oneself over. To free one another, *Dasein* must intentionally give itself over to another, subordinating selfish motivations for the hopes that *cooperative giving* equates with *mutual gain*. An example of this dynamic of belonging embedded within religious conversion can be found in Chapter 1 of the *Book of Ruth*. Following the deaths of husband and sons, Naomi tells her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to turn away (1:8, 1:11, and 1:12), and to leave Naomi and her misfortunes. Though it is traditionally understood that Orpah “turned” when she returned to Moab and that Ruth did not, I would like to suggest that Ruth also “turned” through her decision to *belong* with Naomi, including a total conversion to Naomi’s way of life and to Naomi’s God. Ruth 1:16 says:

And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

This example suggests that Ruth's giving of herself over to Naomi is a way to create belonging for herself; yet, Heidegger's quote above reminds me that the freeing nature of belonging is mutual and reciprocal, a shared *Being-with*. In this example, who is freeing whom? In which world do Ruth and Naomi find themselves? Does Ruth free herself and Naomi at the same time? Biblical accounts of Ruth suggest that she is of a wise and caring nature, not wanting to abandon and create distance, and that this impulse is in alignment with positive spiritual principles. Lao (1989) would agree.

In the *Tao Teh Ching*, Lao states:

Hence, the Sage is always good at saving men [sic], And therefore *nobody is abandoned*; Always good at saving things, And therefore *nothing is wasted*. This is called "following the guidance of the Inner Light." [emphasis added] (Stanza 27, 1989, p. 55)

Lao states unequivocally that those who have wisdom and knowledge (Sages) have an additional responsibility to bring these gifts to the benefit of other people, to *save* them. Combined with the mutual freedom afforded by *Dasein*, saving here is not the patronizing proselytizing commonly associated with that word today. Rather, it is an act of wisdom that recognizes mutual and reciprocal gain in cooperation with another. Ruth saves Naomi by turning toward her in a gesture of intimate belonging. In return, Naomi's world opens to Ruth, providing her the means to find a new family with Naomi's kin, Boaz. This is the foundation of creating community with others. What happens when we make the choice to bond with others in a community of choice? Is conversion giving of oneself?

A community of our choosing.

On becoming his steward, Yuan Ssu was given nine hundred measures of grain which he declined. The Master said, “Can you not find a use for it in helping the people in your neighborhood?” (Analects of Confucius, Book VI, Stanza 5, p. 47)

To move or turn toward a new religious community is an endeavor of trust in the idea that the belonging embrace will receive us at the end of our journey. How do converts know what awaits them? Do we choose our community or create it upon our arrival? Noddings (2003) says of choosing community:

In caring, we accept the natural impulse to act on behalf of the present other. We are engrossed in the other. We have received him and feel his pain or happiness, but *we are not compelled by this impulse. We have a choice; we may accept what we feel, or we may reject it, and this strong desire to be moral is derived, reflectively, from the more fundamental and natural desire to be and to remain related.* To reject the feeling when it arises is either to be in an internal state of imbalance or to contribute willfully to the diminution of the ethical ideal. [emphasis added] (p. 83)

Noddings clarifies that the creation of community is first felt through the emotion of “caring” and a “desire to be moral.” In choosing a new community, do we see alignment with the new community’s sense of morality and that which we care about? Do we experience community when we feel cared for, and deem that care to be moral? In linking these ideas, conversion appears to be a highly rational activity, particularly for those who perceive their communities of origin to have lost a sense of caring or morality. Being embraced into a new religious faith has often been the allure for those who wish to care, and be cared for, in a new moral community. For some, however, the community promises care and morality, but delivers something altogether different. For those who are drawn, perhaps by force, to a new faith, they learn to forget their loss out of necessity.

Rejection from community: Forgetting.

Levinas is also cautious in relation to suffering: he does not want to explain away suffering and regards it as something that is without meaning. Like God's name, suffering refers to a transcendence, to something that does not fit into the ordinary scheme of things and breaks open the boundaries of known reality. (Van Riessen, 2007, p. 101)

Considering what it means to choose a religious community, a study of conversion implies the need to consider the possibility that some do not freely choose their new community, but have it coercively forced upon them. Nowhere is the experience of forced conversion more apparent than in the example of the Christianization of Native American peoples under the now-notorious *Doctrine of Discovery*, ostensibly to bring Native Americans into the community of our nation through a process completely and ironically devoid of *communitas*. Spring (2005) is clear in his assessment that education was *overtly* used as a tool for religious and cultural conversion. Spring says, "These early New England efforts [at education] set the pattern of linking religious conversion with cultural conversion" (p. 26). Though discovering a link between religious conversion and oppressive education is nothing new, Spring reveals a new way of thinking about coercive, forced conversion as a particular process. He describes the conversion experience that was imposed on the Native Americans as simply *forgetting*. The etymological meaning of the word *forget* comes from the Old German word *fergetan* (*fer* meaning "for" and *getan* meaning "take hold of"), thereby implying a meaning where one literally "misses or loses one's hold." Thus, to forget something suggests an intimate physical response that mirrors the mental relationship implied in memory.

If that is the case, what does it mean to convert in this way? Can the act of forgetting literally sicken the body or leave an absence that weakens our forms? Can forgetting one's past rituals, practices, religion, and culture be accurately called *conversion* when there is no other option but to take hold of what is new, while simultaneously discarding what one has known? Does the word "convert" imply that one is choosing among a variety of options, and still holding onto memories of the past to keep oneself mentally and physically intact? I am deeply unsettled by this type of conversion, because it sets itself to appear benign, but feels laced with coercion. Spring (2005) illuminates an example of this conversion-as-forgetting process when discussing the accomplishments of a Cherokee Native American named Sequoyah who invented a written language equivalent to the oral Cherokee language. The Cherokee's white religious educators openly stated their desire to convert their intended victims through forgetfulness. Spring provides this account as he states:

Sequoyah developed a written Cherokee language for the purpose of preserving Cherokee culture. Missionaries reacted negatively to Sequoyah's invention because it threatened their [educational and religious] efforts. The Reverend John Gambold wrote, regarding Sequoyah's invention, "The study of their language would in a great measure prove but time and labor lost... It seems desirable that their Language, Customs, Manner of Thinking should be *forgotten*." [emphasis added] (p. 124)

This past example of coercive conversion leads me to consider whether conversion-as-forgetting is a phenomenon of the past, or does it continue to this day? I suspect that modern missionary movements in the developing world (including those with regularly assessed educational programs) largely operate without scrutiny to their *religious intent or impact*. After all, if the only form of assessment is whether a

particular language is acquired or certain skills are developed, then educational programs could potentially re-impose our historical arrogance on unsuspecting and/or relatively powerless people, because religious educators will not be looking for signs of cultural, religious, or linguistic destruction as by-products of this form of instruction. Are people around the world forgetting themselves again? Are students in religious parochial or charter schools experiencing a form of forgetting? Spring (2005) wisely notes the perils of unexamined and unrestricted religious education:

When religion linked arms with government, religious doctrines were used to justify tyranny; and when education was a function of a state-established religion, religious doctrines were used to justify the power of the state and to mold future citizens into a condition of obedience. (p. 30)

Are we sure this imperialist tactic is not marching forward today? What is the aftermath of such an experience? I leave the door open to understanding *forced* conversion, because it may be something that presents itself to me later as the shadow aspect of my research. I am also open to those experiences where the iron hand of force comes within the silk glove of coercion. How am I to understand those experiences that take a lifetime or several lifetimes to manifest the deleterious effects of conversion?

Remembering: Creating memories of our future. Thankfully, we no longer have a *de jour* policy of abducting people for the purpose of forced religious programming. But there is a different dynamic that I believe continues to exist in our society: the powerful, subtle social tides that push people, perhaps across generations, into conversion. Having grown up Christian, but having immediate Jewish ancestry, McBride (2006) describes the moment when he was able to understand fully the almost imperceptible forces that ultimately led his own mother to convert to Christianity from

Judaism. Deeply rooted in pain, exclusion, and bigotry, these coercive forces have effects whose impact is felt generations into the future. McBride recalls the spiritual experience that he had when he walked the river that his Jewish grandmother, Hudis Shilsky, often walked:

It suddenly occurred to me that my grandmother had walked around here and gazed upon this water many times, and the loneliness and agony that Hudis Shilsky felt as a Jew in this lonely southern town—far from her mother and sisters in New York, unable to speak English, a disabled Polish immigrant whose husband had no love for her and whose dreams of seeing her children grow up in America vanished as her life drained out of her at the age of forty-six—suddenly rose up in my blood and washed over me in waves. A penetrating loneliness covered me, lay on me so heavily I had to sit down and cover my face. I had no tears to shed. They were done long ago, but a new pain and a new awareness were born inside me. The uncertainty that lived inside me began to dissipate; the ache that the little boy who stared in the mirror felt was gone. My own humanity was awakened, rising up to greet me with a handshake as I watched the first glimmers of sunlight peek over the horizon... I left for New York happy in the knowledge that my grandmother had not suffered and died for nothing. (pp. 228-229)

Though the vast majority of the above quote suggests a bitter ending, McBride takes a turn that is profoundly positive and transformative of his own life. Previously plagued with a sense of inferiority and insecurity, McBride finds strength in the resilience of his grandmother and her memory brought forward into his own life, transforming his future. What can we inherit from our ancestors that we currently do not see or recognize as useful? Can the pain of exclusion, a lack of belonging, and/or conversion-from-weariness be redeemed or reclaimed? McBride suggests that this kind of conversion is not necessarily a conversion *back*, as he does not convert to Judaism. But he does find

strength in the experience of Judaism through his grandmother. Can we experience the strength of a religion and not be a member?

When Belonging Lies Elsewhere

In seeking to connect the broader concept of belonging with my own experience and the participant experiences of my preliminary study, the metaphor of a masquerade emerges that nicely holds the essences of this phenomenon. These experiences are not driven by the metaphor, but rather, are framed by it to bring the phenomenon closer and tightly into view. The process described below appears linear, but has many loops and points of slippage that bring the phenomenon to previous places. The nature of *Dasein* is such that the phenomenon begins with the Heideggerian lightning-flash of Being that arrives when truth is brought forward from Being. Thus, I bring those inner spaces forward into my conversation with three women whom I call Susana, Maria, and Jing.

Dreams: Unconscious awareness of masks and mirrors.

And in the naked light I saw
 Ten thousand people maybe more
 People talking without speaking
 People hearing without listening
 People writing songs that voices never shared
 No one dared
 Disturb the sound of silence

“Fools,” said I, “you do not know
 Silence like a cancer grows
 Hear my words that I might teach you
 Take my arms that I might reach you”
 But my words like silent raindrops fell
 And echoed in the wells of silence
 (Simon & Garfunkel, 1964)

Expressing themselves through the retelling of a dream-like vision, Simon and Garfunkel (1964) sought to express the deep problems they saw in society (particularly

the ongoing Vietnam War) that were rooted in the self-centeredness of those around them. It was this dream that prompted the singer to cry a word of warning to those around him. Though the people in the song could not hear the singer, real people heard the song and were deeply moved by its simplicity and significance. It was precisely the unconscious way that dreams approach us that is captured by this powerful song.

Though my own dreams are not translated to popular music, the power of dream awareness made a significant impact on my own experience of conversion. In this dream in my teen-age years, I found myself in a fantastical masquerade.

The colors were vivid, and the music was fanciful and odd, like the instruments were slightly out of tune. People danced with ornate flourishes and lavishly drank wine from large goblets. I felt drunk, though I hadn't had a drop of the strange brew. Something told me that I was expected to dance as well, but I didn't know the moves. I was expected to laugh, but I didn't understand the humor. Were they looking at me? Did they know that I hadn't practiced the dance? Could they tell that I didn't get the joke? It felt really awkward. I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks and forehead, a sign of my acute self-awareness. I was glad of the fact that my reactions were carefully hidden. You see, I was wearing the tight harlequin outfit I was told to wear, my foolproof armor stitched by someone else's hand. And I had my mask on, an eternally blank expression for all to see, and subsequently, register their approval, my impervious shield.

I remember awaking with a start and experiencing the awareness and clarity that my subconscious was trying to get my attention. It did not make a lot of sense to me then, but it makes much more sense now as I look back to that dream. In retrospect, I can see that the dream reflects a sense of my adolescent self's insecurity of truly belonging and fitting in with others, and no doubt the change in my faith was a part of that insecurity. Only when looking back at the details of my life (that I ignored then as insignificant), do

I truly get a sense of how powerful the social forces of conformity are, particularly when the topic is faithful attendance and belief in the religion of one's family, friends, culture, and nation.

How simple it would be if our internal perspective on faith, like a child's jigsaw puzzle, simply fit with the religious pieces around it. Are challenge and adversity essential ingredients for one's faith? Are those ingredients also necessary for conversion? What must it be like to observe, in an almost disembodied way, the people closest in your life continuing religious customs and norms that seem alien, bizarre, or even pointless to you? After the dream, one thing was certain. My waking hours would be invaded with disturbing thoughts and concerns about the nature of my own faith and the relationships I had that unconsciously rested on that faith. Though I read it decades after the above dream, Rilke (2005) could have written the following words for me in place of the Younger Brother. From the *Book of a Monastic Life*, Rilke says: "But now, like a whispering in dark streets, rumors of God run through your dark blood" (*To the Younger Brother*, Poem 38, p. 97).

Pondering: Conscious time for the soul.

A day of Silence can be a pilgrimage in itself. A day of Silence can help you listen to the Soul play its marvelous lute and drum. Is not most talking a crazed defense of a crumbling fort? (*Silence*, Hafiz, 2006, p. 67)

I interpret the "dark blood" of Rilke's poem as the evidence that life is changing and that change manifests itself in the disturbance one feels within one's body. For me that was true, and that phrase resonates with me as O'Brien's (1998) "story truth." Though disturbing, those "rumors" prompted an intensive inner search for deeper understanding of what I actually believed and the implications it had for how I defined

myself. The Muslim sage, Khalil Gibran (1923), offers these words to underscore the importance of self-knowledge being the true purpose of all humans. He says:

And a man said, Speak to us of Self-Knowledge. And he answered, saying: Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights. But your ears thirst for the sound of your heart's knowledge. You would know in words that which you have always known in thought. You would touch with your own fingers the naked body of your dreams... And seek not the depths of your knowledge with staff or sounding line. For self is a sea boundless and measureless. Say not, "I have found the truth," but rather, "I have found a truth." Say not, "I have found the path of the soul." Say rather, "I have met the soul walking upon my path." For the soul walks upon all paths. The soul walks not upon a line; neither does it grow like a reed. The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals. (pp. 60-61)

While those rumors continued to run in my own blood, my search revealed inner awareness that I had not known before. I realized that the *process* of the search was becoming as important as the conversion *endpoint*, if not eclipsing it altogether. The journey was difficult, however, because the evidence of this inner conversation was becoming apparent through the time I took to actually consider every precept and dogma that I was given. It was the *time* I took to carefully weigh every word that alerted those around me to my inner conversation.

Wheatley (2009) suggests that the clue of time can be threatening, because it reveals the pondering that happens within, making the invisible visible:

Don't expect anybody to give you this time. You will have to claim it for yourself. No one will give it to you because thinking is always dangerous to the status quo... Thinking is not inaction. (pp. 101-102)

Is this word of warning from Wheatley the last signpost before one undertakes conversion? The quote indicates that conversion likely will be accompanied by an intense

scrutiny of those who slow down the socialization process to carefully decide what they will choose to consume. Do others ponder the moments of their religious lives with such intensity as I have? What follows is a reflective rendering of three very different women who also started in this disjointed and uncomfortable place, and set out on a similar journey with unique byways. Below, are the stories of Susana, Maria, and Jing.

Discomfort: Not fitting. It appears that the most important starting points of our life's journeys always begin with a sense of discomfort caused from a poor fit or a sense that we do not perfectly belong. The journey for a good religious *taylor* always begins when we realize that we are dissatisfied with our current *garments*, the trappings we inherited from the people around us as well as our ancestors. Though he originally was speaking on the subject of changing particularities of government, Thomas Jefferson (1829) reflected on the feeling of being trapped by the expectations of our ancestors in a letter to Samuel Kercheval:

We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors. (p. ME 15:41)

When looking at religious practices of our ancestors, no doubt there is a chaffing from the metaphoric religious garb that simply no longer fits. But do people adapt to this discomfort or continue to live in tension? Do we simply take off all the clothing and reveal ourselves, or do we undertake a more gradual approach, loosening the collar, stretching the waist, or dislodging the mask? Or worse, do people simply suffer the discomfort in silence and isolation? Despite her misgivings, Maria chose to do just that. She says:

I spent some time in the Christian church. Baptist. I went through some of the steps you go through to proclaim to be Christian. I got baptized. I had the meetings with people and accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior, but I never really internally identified with that. I went through the steps, but I didn't feel it.

Maria's story indicates that the sense of religious *fit* is something that one must *feel* in order to be experienced and accepted as real. Thus, to understand religious conversion, I realize that I need to understand what it feels like to *not* fit in a particular religion, the feelings of being *between* religions, and what it feels like to *discover* or *uncover* a new one.

For some, the experience of not fitting is not acute, but gradual, and often accompanied by long stretches of boredom. "This is definitely my parent's thing," Susan thought to herself. Anglicanism only has Susan going through the motions, because her father is a lay preacher and simply expects that his daughter will embrace what he has embraced. Does he understand that Susan, as a young woman, can never truly see herself fitting as he does? As a man, can he fathom what it means to have every image and story of Christianity giving a 13-year-old English girl a sense that her story was somewhere else, somewhere *out there*? For now, Susan feigns interest and wears her Anglican mask as best she can for the benefit of her father.

Across the globe in a small town in China, another young girl accompanies her mother to a Buddhist temple to make a small offering with silent prayers to the family ancestors so that Jing will do well on a school exam. When they arrive, Jing's mother provides the appropriate offering. And right on cue, a priest of the temple offers the assistance of an astrological reading for Jing. Soon, she will know *with certainty* whether she will do well on that exam as well as a host of other important life events. But such

scrutiny, especially when focused through the lens of a divine connection, is much too intense, like sunburn on sensitive skin. Jing recalls:

And I don't like them to say, "Okay, you will have this, and you will have that." I don't like that. I would like to have my future on my own. I believe that I can have control of mine.

But Jing patiently submits to the intense scrutiny and swallows her words. As she loosens her religious garments, she does so behind her mother's back and only on parts of her spiritual wardrobe that no one will see.

The experience of not fitting in, however, can also be painful, embarrassing, and rooted in a sense of the hypocrisy one observes between the particular faith's words and the behaviors of its practitioners. Maria went to the local Baptist church, because she lived with her grandmother and "that was the rule." She always perceived the church experiences to be primarily social in nature, but that social support was abruptly stripped from her when she became pregnant. During her late adolescence, Maria had been drugged, raped while unconscious, and had become pregnant against her will and without her knowledge.

Derrida's description of *différance* is helpful in understanding why a benign state of being (pregnancy) could produce such a hostile reaction from Maria's church community. Derrida defines *différance*:

[*Différance* is] the movement according to which language, or any code, system of reference in general is constituted "historically" as a weave of differences (*comme tissu de différences*). (pp. 12-13)

In this case, the *history* of the term "pregnancy" and the *lived [her]story* of pregnancy are understood differently between the church community and Maria. In the eyes of the

church, pregnancy has a historical understanding of being unmarried while pregnant (i.e., promiscuity, fornication, lack of sexual mores, etc.) that does not encompass Maria's unfortunate, all-too-common, and frequently silenced reality. Thus, the church community *literally* cannot conceive of it and inadvertently does irreparable damage to its relationship with Maria.

In this time of great turmoil, bewilderment, and pain, she reached out to the social network her grandmother insisted she be a part of, the church. Her reception, however, was cool at best. Maria recalls:

When I returned to Miami and attended church, I was really... what's the word... excluded, looked down upon, not given the opportunity to talk to anyone, counsel with anyone. Kicked off of the choir. Kicked out of the youth groups. Not allowed to be a counselor. The first thing I asked was "Why?" To them it was very obvious. "You're pregnant and not married." When I tried to explain the situation, I was then also a liar. I had mixed feelings. Angry. I thought that of all the people who should extend and exhibit kindness and understanding... Well, it was totally not what I was getting. [I was] resentful. Hurt. That's when I just said, "That's it."

And like Heidegger's own abrupt exodus from the Catholic church for being what he called a "system" (Moran, 2000, p. 204), Maria left her Christian surroundings. She had been assured that the church would be a safe place for her, a web of support that would catch her if she fell. Instead, like Campbell (2009), she encountered a bureaucratic and rigid religious *system* that was deaf to her particular situation.

Not fitting seems to be a two-way process where we perceive ourselves as being different from the group, but then the group also gives us signals (sometimes overt and other times not) that confirm our initial impressions. For some, a point arrives when

enduring the religion of our birth is simply no longer tolerable. And so we turn away from what we have always known, to something (anything) else.

Converting: The turn. After having finally assessed that our religious attire is no longer suitable, the question arises, “So what shall I wear instead?” Attempting to answer this question begins a process of discovery for something more satisfying and meaningful. Should I try this on? Or perhaps that? Do I look right with it? Will people stare at me? Recalling that the word “convert” comes from the Latin *convertere*, meaning “to turn,” I wonder whether this turn is haphazard or deliberate? Is it a religious spin of the wheel, or is there a certain sense of direction? To assume that the person who turns is simply turning *away* from the old religion, and not *toward* something new and promising, is to assume that the converter has not thought about this move intensely to this point. That could be false.

In fact, the choice of religious direction or destination may be clearly understood by the person undergoing conversion. After all, the convert already knows what aspects of his or her religion *do not* work. It stands to reason that the convert will seek something religious that *does* work, and is consistent with the individual’s presently held values. Moran (2000) says:

Heidegger has strongly insisted that all questioning carries certain presumptions which govern the enquiry and even predetermine to a certain extent what can be discovered. We therefore disclose the answer in the light of what we already know. (p. 237)

Can it be that someone undergoing conversion already has a sense of which religion would be right for him or her based on what the other religion lacks or contains? Can questioning a particular religious principle carry with it the subtle prompting to

investigate another religion that espouses an opposing principle? Or as Heidegger (1962) says, “In working out the question, have we not ‘presupposed’ something which only the answer can bring” (pp. § 2, 27)?

Conversations with these women suggest that this notion holds here, particularly with the idea of finding a religious home where they felt that they belonged. Susan describes her time in the Student Christian Movement as a time when she was given permission to question religious doctrine openly and to investigate scripture critically with other students. Susan says:

It was the first time I had thought about questioning things religiously or theologically. What sticks is the fact that the conference was open to questioning, to looking at what Christianity is about, and why people would believe in it.

In this venue, Susan felt a sense of camaraderie and safety that was lacking in her previous religious environment. Jing echoes the sentiment of wanting to belong when she had come to the United States without her family and a reliable support network. Her experience of not belonging can be understood when viewed through Bachelard’s (1964) exploration of the dichotomy of inside and outside. Bachelard says:

Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of *yes* and *no*, which decides everything... Philosophers, when confronted with inside and outside, think in terms of being and non-being. (pp. 211-212)

Bachelard implies that the feeling of belonging requires that one feel one’s own existence in the midst of others. One must *be* with others in order to *belong* with others. Jing’s sense of not belonging stemmed from a frustrating sense of always looking *inside* and not seeing herself there. This prevented her from *being* when she left her familiar

surroundings where she could *be* easily. Instead, she had to work consciously to belong among others in her new home. Fellowship in the Christian church provided this social outlet for her. Jing says:

So I was thinking I am not sure yet. I don't know if I want to be Christian yet. I think I just want to belong. There is a sense of belonging to some kind of community, a group, or whatever, to belong to, because I didn't know anyone here. And I had to leave my background to lead a new one. So I go there every Friday night. It was real close, and I don't have money, so I went there every Friday night.

Jing's sentiments resonate with much of Maria's story as well. Maria simply wanted to be in a place where she felt a sense of belonging, particularly after the profound alienation she felt upon her unexpected pregnancy. When she finally converted away from the Baptist faith to a new Buddhist religious community, she says it was like she was among "like-minded people, regardless of race."

Transitioning: The crossing.

They call themselves "Walk-outs." They walk out of work and careers that prevent them from contributing as much as they can, they walk out of relationships where they don't feel respected, they walk out of ideas that are limiting, they walk out of institutions that make them feel small and worthless. But they don't walk out to disappear—they walk out to walk on. (Wheatley, 2009, p. 154)

Finding a new religion is not an instant experience, but a very slow process. While discovering a new religion, the convert slowly undergoes a transformation. The disrobing is not usually a sensual, confident, and leisurely strip tease in front of a mirror. We do not linger in the mirror to admire ourselves. Rather, it is the maddeningly slow pace (with occasional fits of creative inspiration) of someone who is very self-conscious and cannot decide exactly what to wear when going out. There is some attention to

matching colors and a sense of *appropriate fit*. Yet even when an outfit has been selected, doubts linger about the suitability of our clothes. The piles of discarded articles do not yield a sense of overt confidence in the latest choice or our overall *fashion sense*. So we go through the slow trial and error process in the hopes that something eventually looks acceptable.

Coupled with this fact is the sense that conversion, in the strict etymological sense of the word, happens before a new religion is chosen. But if conversion, broadly defined, is such a complicated process, does it ever end? At what point has someone successfully *transitioned* to a new religious identity? A clue lies in the meaning of the word “transition.” Coming from the Latin word *transitionem*, meaning “going across or over,” transitioning seems like the next logical step after converting (or turning away). What does *crossing over* feel like? Can we go back if we want to? What happens when we have gone from one shore to another? What happens in between? Bridges (2001) provides a metaphor for what this transition experience feels like *spatially*. He describes this transition place as the *neutral zone*:

It is a season of dormancy when life withdraws back into the root to get ready for a long, cold season without whatever had given warmth and meaning to life-before-the-ending. It is a strange no-man’s-land between one world and the next. It is a zone where you pick up mixed signals, some coming from the past and some from the future. Some times the signals jumble into noise, while at other times they cancel each other out, leaving only an eerie silence. It is a low-pressure area, where all kinds of heavy weather is drawn into the vacuum left by the loss. It is a dark night of the heart—or, maybe, a long dark twilight that refuses to resolve itself into either real day or true night. (p. 156)

With such a long journey away from Anglicanism, Susan's transition to a new identity was a gradual movement through Bridges' *neutral zone*, in the way the sunrise changes the night's colors from dark bluish black to bright hues of pink, white, and cerulean. It is totally different than before, but the change is barely noticeable. She recalls that even the term *conversion* seems to imply an about-face at a particular point in time. To her, it simply was not like that. Susan says:

I don't know if it was a *conversion*. I believe it was a movement to a place where *Christian* wasn't needed anymore, because it didn't feel like a conversion until I moved further and further to the edges of Christianity. And then I moved on.

Indeed, Susan had moved to the edge and had crossed over to something else. She had "walked out to walk on" as Wheatley's quote above suggests. She transitioned through the *neutral zone* by simply letting go of what no longer fit her.

A transition also implies a particular amount of time to cross over and a particular point of destination. How long does it take to transition to a new religion? How do you know when you've arrived? Maria describes her own process of transitioning to Buddhism through a question that her sister, also a Buddhist transient, asked during a Buddhist function. Maria says:

I don't know if I can pinpoint a moment. My sister asked one of the members of this lay organization about it, and she said, "Well, when do I become a Buddhist?" The response she received from one of the women was, "When you say you are. If you're Buddhist, you're Buddhist."

Apparently, when you arrive at the new religious destination, you'll just know. Maria's sister could just as easily have asked, "When do I get to take my old mask off; i.e., when can I let you see the real me?" Rephrasing the question reveals its absurdity, because the

mask's function only makes sense in the old environment, not in the new one. It becomes useless here, so why wear it anymore? Simply, only the person in transition knows when the time has arrived to claim a new religious identity, an identity that ironically has already claimed that person. Thus, time quietly passes, allowing us to discard our mask, wear a new article, and gradually become accustomed to it.

Transitioning also contains within it the idea that some may never complete the journey, opting instead for a very circuitous, truncated route. Jing struggled in defining whether she ever truly converted to Christianity. In thinking about Christian religious doctrine, Jing decided that she never really believed the Christian *story*, but that she craved the experience of *fellowship* and had identified as a Christian *socially*. She had transitioned (in the sense of leaving her weakly-identified Buddhism and Taoism behind to be among Christians), but she did not subscribe to every aspect of Christianity.

Speaking of religious ideology, Jing says of Christianity:

Being a Christian would say there is only One. And that is one thing that drives me crazy. There is nothing that is only One. There are so many things. Yes, there is not just One.

But when speaking about the community of Christians, Jing slows her speech down and reacts wistfully. She is peering into their community as an outsider who longs to be on the inside, to belong:

I was just saying "I want to be one of them." Being at the [Christian] conference, I was just an outsider, like in the fellowship. I was so skeptical, and I always challenged them about the Bible. Like why this and why that? But I always feel like I am just an outsider, and I am not that good. But there were moments that I wanted to *be* in there.

Jing's story of being at the Christian conference is one of journeying toward Christianity, but not yet finding herself wearing a Christian identity.

Realizing: Existence and understanding as Xeno's paradox. Maria, Susan, and Jing each describe their religious change as a long process without a clear, pinpointed time of suddenly *being* that particular new religious identity. Thus, even if the process is very slow and creeps up on the convert/transient, its movement is observable, while the specific moment of acquisition of a new identity is not. Essentially, these women recognized the presence of a new identity only when they saw in retrospect that the identity was already there, not in any particular moment of the past. But at some point, each of them obtains a new identity anyway. What is this identity? How is it possible to *become* something new, if the actual moment of suddenly *being* it is not observable? Most importantly, how and when do *becoming* and *being* converge? Can we know this moment? It seems to imply that *being* a new religious identity (usually characterized as a static state of existence) is not an apt description for a *becoming* process of religious conversion/transition that is perpetually in motion, i.e., that a religious identity is best described as a *process*, rather than as a *result*. Thus, can we describe the acquisition of a new identity as simply *realizing* the presence of this conversion/transition process?

To “realize” comes from the Old French word *réaliser*, containing the double meaning to “bring into existence” and “understand clearly.” The simultaneous nature of the word “realize” is intriguing in a religious context. It implies that the new identity is brought fully into existence simply by having a clear sense of its presence; its embodied *now-ness*. This sense of realization seems to answer the puzzling nature of never observing the moment of *being* a new religious identity while still *becoming* one; i.e., the

complex achieving of an identity as the profoundly simple answer of a religious Xeno's paradox.

Xeno, a Greek philosopher, posited that that to move between two points (A and B), a traveler always had to come to a halfway point in between. Yet at the first halfway point, the traveler would need to cross yet another halfway point to get to the final destination. This understanding of an infinite number of halfway points logically leads to the conclusion that the traveler can never arrive at point B. Yet, arrival at point B is possible and happens all the time. The same appears to be true of obtaining a new religious identity. Though the moment of *being* is never observed, people nevertheless arrive at a new identity (point B) through simply experiencing its present *now-ness as a process of becoming*; i.e., the specific moment cannot be seen, but the before and after of that moment can be seen.

Such a profound overcoming of this paradox produces a distinct physical sense of realization through an elongation of time that brings clarity and relief. These reactions are unmistakable and firmly rooted in the body. Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests that the body is a gauge of what is going on in the world around any particular person. He says:

Our own body (*le corps propre*) is in the world as the heart is in the organism; it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system. (p. 203)

In the context of religious realization, the body, being at the heart of the religious “spectacle,” recognizes the subconscious truth of the change in identity and sets off a physical alarm to draw attention to this truth. Susan says of this moment of realization:

And in 1986, I met this woman called Shawn who was involved with this group called House of the Goddess. And I thought, “Oh, this sounds good.” When I met Shawn, and

started doing a class with her, I thought, “This is my path.”
Total gut reaction. Gut, physical...I felt hot, cold, shivery,
wow... what is going on here?

In that moment, Susan *knew* that she was a Pagan, but could not tell you when she actually *became* a Pagan.

Maria had a similar reaction of realizing she was a Buddhist when she was asked by an acquaintance the arrogantly presumptuous question of which church she attended. Despite other identities they had in common, this seemingly innocuous question highlighted Maria’s outsider status as an unnoticed Other. She said:

I didn’t know what to say. So, I said, “I *used* to go to this particular church.” [I felt] conflicted, because I was a little angry with myself. And I didn’t like that feeling of almost being afraid or ashamed to tell people that I was not practicing what they were practicing. Or doing something different. And I didn’t like that feeling. When I went home from that job fair, I said, “If anybody else ever asks me, I’m just going to tell them.”

In confronting her own decision to *hide* her Buddhist identity, Maria realized that she *had* a secret Buddhist identity to hide in the first place. Van Manen and Levering (1996) reveal how important this moment is to the realization of Maria’s religious identity. They state:

While we sometimes hide (through pretense, simulation, feigning, lying) aspects of our inner thoughts and feelings, the point is that this process of showing and hiding is a thoroughly relational phenomenon. Often, we only discover the weight and meaning of keeping a secret when we are interacting with the person from whom we want to hide it. (p. 105)

In other words, Maria brought her Buddhist identity forward by simply understanding that it existed, especially when seeing it in stark contrast to the religious identities of the women around her (from whom she was hiding her identity). In reflexively placing her

mask on for the benefit of these women, Maria knew that beneath her Christian mask was a Buddhist face.

Jing experienced her realization at the end of a long process that gained steam at the Christian conference that she attended. While at the conference, she had an impulsive experience, deep within her, that made her want to be a Christian. She says:

Ok. I just want to be one of them, and I'm kind of relaxed.
I was just relaxed. And then very soon, I become sore. I
tell the lady next to me... I tell her I want to be a Christian.
And then she prays for me.

But this is not Jing's moment of realization. She does not *feel* like a Christian at this moment. Instead, she intensively feels the *desire* to be a Christian. She wants to belong. For Jing, *realization* happens later during a conversation with her sister, when she is faced with the looming reality that she will be returning to China to visit her family (particularly her very religious, Buddhist/Taoist mother). In that conversation, Jing realizes her Christian identity when her sister engages her in conversation about what she has been doing while in the United States. At that point, Jing reveals her Christian identity and says:

My sister said "okay." My mom's stepmother is a
Christian, but everybody treats her as a stranger, crazy.
(laughs) And my sister has a really good relationship with
my mom's stepmother, so she just says "okay." And I tell
her not to tell anyone, [but] then she told my dad.

Finding herself in a context where Christianity is treated like an oddity, Jing now sees that she is different from those she thought she was like. In seeing herself as different, Jing can now see her authentic self. Like Maria, Jing realizes her Christian identity when she is faced with a context that will not be receptive to its presence. She senses a part of her that *has* identified with a piece of Christianity, and she knows she cannot deny it.

In each of these stories, the convert/transient/realizer notices the steady progression of *becoming* and thus, *being* a new identity. This implies that there are endless costumes of apparel that we are removing from our old religion as we simultaneously replace them with an equally vast wardrobe of new articles to wear. What must we look like now? As a mixture of old and new fashion, do we look unrecognizable to adherents of either religion? While wearing little bits of intractable fabric from an old religion, can converters ever look like those who grew up in a religion? Do we ever cease to be a fashion hybrid? And what do we do when people begin to notice that we are not wearing what we used to wear, and that we now look very different?

Re-masking: Negotiating the environment. Our lives do not stop once a new religious identity is realized. Life goes on, and this often involves *coming out* about the new identity to close family and friends. What happens when family and friends are confronted with this new reality, our true and unmasked face? Is there fear associated with revelation of a religious change? The converter naturally fears rejection, but the family may fear the unknown around this new identity or a sense that the converter has rejected them also. What is the aftermath of such a profound shift in identity? What will happen when our families and friends no longer see the mask they thought was our true face, and instead see our newly-revealed face as the mask of an unknown person?

The word “mask” yields numerous insights into what is likely to occur. “Mask” comes from the Latin *masca*, meaning “spectre” or “nightmare.” *Masca* has roots in the Old Occitan term *masco*, meaning “witch” or “dark cloud before the rain comes” (which both currently survive in certain French and Italian dialects). Simply, our true face can

be seen as a scary mask, in all the senses of the word, to those who thought they knew us so well. We now look frighteningly different in our new religious attire and with our unmasked face, itself a mask of foreignness and difference.

Susan chose to never tell her parents about her new Pagan identity and is somewhat private about it with her remaining relatives and friends. Perhaps her shy disposition stems from a frightening incident she had with a co-worker. She explains:

In one of my work settings, I had a very, very negative reaction from one of the black workers, who mentally wasn't very well, but targeted me. She attacked me... She decided that I was trying to hex her and linked my witchcraft with voodoo. She accused me of drumming negative magic against her. She came at me with a pencil and tried to stab me. I was quite shocked and managed to move away. The other people in the team managed to move her, and separated us physically. I went and sat in the manager's office and was a little shaken... I suppose I'm careful around people whom I know... particularly some of the black workers who are very fundamentalist.

Susan found herself in a situation where revealing her true face inadvertently brought about a reaction from her coworker that was rooted in a fear of witches, i.e., the mask.

Jing's re-masking happened when she returned to China, and was largely the reason why she abandoned Christianity after having just realized it. Now that her father knew of her new Christian identity, he informed her, in no uncertain terms, of his opposition on the matter. Jing recalls:

He talked to me. It's like "I don't think you made a proper decision. You should have consulted me and your mother first, before you made that decision. I am not happy at all." I couldn't say a word, *since I did something wrong*. I really should have talked to them first.

Jing recants her newfound realization when she bumps up against a deep sense that she has betrayed her parents, perhaps the most profound bestowers of *communitas*, by

engaging in this process in the first place. By placing coercive pressure on Jing to return to her previous identity, the family and culture become synonymous with the old religion. The choice before Jing, thus, becomes untenable. She must relent to come back into the fold of family, culture, and religion.

Maria has an equally painful experience with a co-worker/friend who identified as a Christian and had been actively soliciting Maria to join her church. Maria's revelation of a Buddhist identity came as something of a shock, so much so that her friend simply gets up and leaves Maria's presence. She says:

I was excited to get in the conversation with her and tell her, because she and I had become very close. I wanted to share this with her, so I was excited. [I said,] "Oh, guess what. I want you to come over, because I want to show you my altar and all this." And she had a very visceral reaction, like "Oh my God, you know... altar and... *what are you doing?!*" And she had to physically get up and walk out. And when she did, I had that roller coaster, sinking in the belly... like... ugh... And I thought, "Did I insult her?" Or was her walking out insulting to me? I was confused. What just happened? I was a little bit pissed, because I thought we were close. And I thought I could talk to her about this. And she just wasn't going to let me, but then I had to stop and think that she has processed this. (laugh).

Maria persistently cultivated her relationship with her friend. Though she was temporarily re-masked, Maria finally was able to get her friend to see her true face *as a face and not a mask*. After discussing their religious differences and the effect these differences would have (or not have) on their friendship, they were able to move through the difficulty and establish their friendship anew.

In addition, the re-masking stories of Maria and Jing illustrate a complex dynamic tension that exists when people move to a new religious identity that is typically

associated with another racial group; i.e. the re-masking takes on racial overtones where the person's race is incongruent with the perceived race of the religious identity. Clark (2003) describes these nuanced and intersectional phenomena as the "role that religion lays in defining other social identity group memberships. For example, how does being Catholic define Latina/o racial identity, or being Baptist define African American ethnicity?" (p. 51). Clark's article suggests that racial and religious identities are intimately intertwined. Maria is African American and has become a Buddhist, a religion typically associated with Asian people. Likewise, Jing has become a Christian (and back again) from a Chinese background that typically associates Christianity with White people. What are these nuanced connections between religion and race? How do individuals who practice a religion typically associated with individuals of another race negotiate this gap?

An inquiry into the term "race," lends a clue to what it must be like, because of the assumptions embedded within the term. "Race" comes from the Old French and Spanish *razza*, meaning "people of common descent, breed, lineage." In Old English, the term "race" came to mean "wines with a common characteristic." If race informs something about common lineages or characteristics, then seeing people who look like you practicing a religion that is perceived as foreign, can be interpreted as a betrayal to the race, where race and religion become co-mingled.

Maria says that her Buddhist identity is typically not well received by other Black people. She says:

I was a little concerned about reactions, especially from the black community. I still get that feeling occasionally in certain [Black] circles, because oftentimes when people say "What church do you go to?" I do say "I'm Buddhist." In

certain circles, it's "Hi. What's your name? What church do you go to?" For a while of trying to sidestep that, I just have to come out and say, "Oh, I don't attend a church. I'm Buddhist. We do have a community center that we go to." The reactions vary. I've had to just steel myself for it.

Jing had a similar reaction to the way Chinese language and culture react to Christianity.

She found that she could only truly be a Christian *while speaking English*, because the Chinese language made common Christian phrases profoundly absurd and outside Chinese cultural norms. Gadamer and Dottori (2004) would suggest that this disjointed experience was due to the idea that Christian imagery and scripture (in the U.S. context) are largely rooted in an English rhetoric that cannot be literally translated when attempting to create a unified religious experience with people from different cultures.

Gadamer and Dottori say:

The point of rhetoric is to teach one how to deliver or compose a speech so as to make possible a genuine understanding (synesis) and an authentic communication (sygnome), which constitute the basis for an actual consensus. (p. 57)

Despite Jing's desire to participate in the religious experience, the rhetoric of the service precluded her from experiencing consensus, that sense that she was united in understanding with those persons around her. Jing says:

Usually I go to the English Sunday service. But one day I went to the Chinese service. They translated it into Chinese. There prayed to God. In the Bible, there is a prayer to God. When they pray to God, the language that they used made me feel that [it was] the language that my mom used for *her* practice. So I just don't feel comfortable with that. It made me feel like it was going back to my mom's practice again. But when it goes to English, it's just like a *new language* for me. So, I can freely accept whatever it is. [In Chinese,] we have the words to say different things, but it's just not natural. We just don't say, "I love you." It's really easy for me to say "I love you" in

English. “I love you” is not easy to say in Mandarin. I’m not sure whether it’s because of the culture, [but] people don’t really express their emotion. Like when the Christian [text] is translated into the Chinese to say that “I will love God” and then “believe in God.” I don’t know. I’m not comfortable with that.

The stories of Maria and Jing illustrate that race becomes salient when the new religious identity is perceived as incongruent to the racial identity. If the movement in religious identity is within a racial context; however, race becomes less important. For this reason, it is not surprising that Susan does not mention it. She moved from Anglicanism to Paganism, two religions that are typically associated with White persons.

Initial insights: Brief flashes of lightning to move forward. Upon closer inspection, the popular notion of religious conversion can actually be parsed out into a patchwork pattern of non-linear events: Discomfort and Not Fitting, Conversion, Transition, Realization, and Re-Masking. This collection of phases yields particular insights into the way religious identity change can affect the converter and the people around him or her, particularly in an educational context. These insights include the following. I cannot assume unanimity of thought, feeling, or belief in our religious contexts (*Discomfort*). Because of the converter’s intensive search for self and meaning, the converter may be far more knowledgeable about his or her religion and the religion of others than the average (*Conversion*). A deep sense of *not belonging* may be far more powerful in motivating someone to pursue a change in his or her religious identity than the constant, countervailing forces keeping this person in place (*Transition*). Though it is frequently listed among other social identities such as race and sex, religious identity development, particularly when undertaken through conversion, has very unique properties vis-à-vis other social identities (*Realization*). There is an ever-present *sliding*

back process of identity negotiation with the converter's environment that may force that person to enter a previous phase of the conversion process (*Re-Masking*).

Though it seems obvious, the assumption of unanimity in the religious contexts of these women created profound dissonance in their religious identities. Each experienced this assumption as constricting and alienating, particularly in their youth. As youth, they were largely unable to articulate their beliefs, values, and life experiences, and they were even less comfortable sharing this ambiguity with their family and friends. Simply, we cannot assume that children are telling us their real feelings around religion, because the imbalance in social power between educator and student makes this revelation potentially dangerous. Their silence or cheerful assent actually may indicate a certain apprehension, not disinterest, about the topic. Even as educators of adults, discussions of religion and religious identification are not socially normative today. These discussions need to be approached in a very open-ended way to allow room for the participants to create a certain amount of distance between themselves and the *label* of the religion to which they subscribe. This room will convey a sense of safety in discussing those parts of the religion in which the participant does not believe, nor subscribe.

It stands to reason that finding a new religious identity will involve a certain amount of research, reading, and reflection. This process implies that the convert has struggled to understand, on some level, the nuanced differences between the new and old religious traditions, and may possess more specific knowledge of various religions than those who have not undertaken this journey. In some cases, the difference may be superficial (e.g., having a sense of the community or particular social issues) or it may be deeper (e.g., esoteric theological issues). In either case, the convert probably has thought

more about these topics than someone who feels no challenge or adversity in his or her religion. With this new knowledge, the possibility also exists that the convert will maintain the open (*vertere*) stance toward other religions, i.e., a sense of being open to other possibilities. It is perhaps this open stance that feeds much of the *buffet* approach to religion that is popular now in U.S. society to which Lugo (2008) alludes.

There is an unmistakable sorting pattern where people find their religious home across the magnetic currents of values, social experiences, and a sense of belonging. This pattern appears even when broader social norms work to keep people from changing their religious identities. Though this dynamic can have negative aspects, there is a silver lining to be found. By having a sense of being an outsider in one's own community, converts are likely to develop a sense of empathy for what it means to be different or misunderstood. These individuals can be very helpful in classroom settings where complex or difficult conversations may have the effect of silencing individuals with unpopular views or identities. The personal experience of transitioning to a new religion can give the transient some connective insight into the topic or other person's story. These students tend to become invaluable in creating safe community norms and healthy classroom communication.

It is erroneous to assume that religious identity development will mirror the development of racial or gender identity simply because they are all social identities. Identity development models popular in the higher education settings of student affairs such as Erikson's (1968) psycho-social model, Komives' (1998) leadership model, or even Chickering's (2006) spiritual development model typically assume observable critical/catalytic moments in the development of more static identities like race or gender

identity. Yet, religious conversion appears to be a fluid process of *becoming*, converging with *being* (only noticed after the fact). The lack of an observable moment of *being* makes comparison across these social identities problematic. This notion complicates the typical expectations people have about identity; i.e., that our social identities are fairly fixed. Because religious identification (especially after conversion) is more fluid, the typical question of *What are you?* or *When did you become that?* can be daunting to answer.

Part of the fluid nature of religious identity and conversion is related to the constant negotiation the convert/transient/realizer must undergo with family, friends, racial groups, and the broader culture. Frankly, this process is difficult, and not everyone undertakes it successfully. Some go back to their beginnings, at least on the surface. In fact, this return to a previous religious identity may be much like alleged changes in sexual identity when someone *comes out* and is forced back *into the closet* due to disapproval. Has this person truly changed sexual identity, or is it simply a re-masking for the benefit of the environment? Thus, a recently realized religious identity can just as quickly be forsaken under the intense pressure of the environment, but it does beg the question whether this re-masking is simply a coping mechanism that buys time for further religious conversion, transitioning, and realization in the future.

In this chapter, I have explored the phenomenon of religious conversion as I have experienced it, but also through the description others have rendered of it. Sounding conversion means sending forth my own perceptions and insights to see what reverberates back from others. From this exploration, I have gathered that religious identity is an extremely slippery concept that needs to remain fluid to adequately capture

the conversion experience itself. Further, faith, certainty, and belonging play crucial roles in making conversion attractive or even necessary. It helps me consider the question: **What is the lived experience of religious conversion?** In the next chapter, I explore the philosophical grounding of phenomenology that supports my research.

CHAPTER 3 PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING: A PATH BETWEEN BEING AND DIVINITY

Why Phenomenology?

As an emerging scholar, I recognize that researchers are grounded in philosophical paradigms in which they situate themselves and their work. These paradigms literally *inform, govern and limit* their work. Thus, choosing a philosophical paradigm to address my topical interests was not an accidental choice. I thought it over carefully and considered my options. As a philosophy fundamentally concerned with the nature of consciousness, ontological being, and the interdependent interaction of the aforementioned with its environment, phenomenology is positioned as ideal in exploring my research interest where the interaction of *perception and being is at the core of the phenomenon*: the phenomenon of religious conversion.

A Proactive Choice

It is important to mention that I choose phenomenology not only because it avoids some of the problems of postivism or post-positivism, but because of what phenomenology *can* do. In other words, I proactively choose phenomenology for methodological grounding, because it is in alignment with the values I have followed in my entire career as a social justice educator and administrator. In particular, phenomenology insists on developing deeply contextualized knowledge that does not discount inconvenient or unexpected data to create a sense of theoretical purity, even trends, or cleanliness. Nothing is too small or insignificant to escape the notice of a phenomenological researcher. No perspective or story, however remote it may be from the norm, is deemed unworthy of consideration in the construction of knowledge around

a phenomenon. With phenomenology, data will never be trumped by theory or erased into oblivion to make sure that the figurative territory is in alignment with the map.

Heidegger (1962) states the importance of this phenomenological stance by decrying traditional scientific approaches to knowledge construction and epistemology that begin by asking narrow questions that can only conceive of, and accept, narrow answers. He says:

The expression ‘phenomenology’ signifies primarily a *methodological conception*. This expression does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject matter, but rather the *how* of that research... Thus, the term ‘phenomenology’ expresses a maxim which can be formulated as ‘To the things themselves!’ It is opposed to all free-floating constructions and accidental findings; it is opposed to taking over any conceptions which only seems to have been demonstrated; it is opposed to those pseudo-questions which parade themselves as ‘problems,’ often for generations at a time. Yet this maxim, one may rejoin, is abundantly self-evident, and it expresses, moreover, the underlying principle of any scientific knowledge whatsoever. (p. 50)

The Location of Knowledge: Celebrating the Particular

The idea of valuing “the things themselves,” even as they appear as the smallest oddity or outlier is a shared value between phenomenology and the field of social justice education. Though phenomenology and social justice education *describe* processes very differently (where the former is much more holistic and the latter is far more stage-oriented), they both share a commitment to the particular as a necessary focal point for research. As a phenomenologist and social justice educator, I celebrate the notion that knowledge is legitimately located in the particular, even if the voice of the particular is often drowned out by the steady drumbeat of the many. Lifting this voice from obscurity

to centrality is the work of social justice where phenomenology is a powerful vehicle to bring it about.

Weaving social justice and phenomenology. To illustrate the necessity to listen to muffled voices, I often cite a seminal, and still very relevant, text in the field of Multicultural Organizational Development (MCOd). This original working paper called *Multicultural Organization Development*, was written by Bailey Jackson and Evangelina Holvino (1988) while both were writing for the Program on Conflict Management Alternatives (PCMA) at the University of Michigan. Jackson and Holvino assess human organizations against a spectrum (from monocultural to multicultural) of possible indicators to diagnose the health of the organization for *all* persons within it, with an explicit goal “to transform the organization in order to enhance human diversity, social justice, and the realization of a human society” (p. 20).

In this assessment, their point of reference is not the average experience of the typical person in the organization, i.e., the mean. Instead, the focus is on the “change agent” who, according to Jackson and Holvino (1988), is often brought into the organization as a “token” or “guest” to mimic true multicultural change without actually infusing meaningful progressive change into the infrastructure. Like a telescope’s strong solar filter used to see obscure planets orbiting a bright star, Jackson and Holvino ask questions that explicitly reveal persons and perspectives (i.e., human science) that were previously eclipsed by the “center” or average experience (i.e., social science). They state:

Different stages in the multicultural development model suggest specific diagnostic indicators to help assess the organizational stage in the MCOd process, and to develop appropriate intervention. For example, what is the status of

members of socially oppressed groups in the organization?
 Are they treated as tokens (club stage), invited guests
 (compliance stage) or as legitimate members of the
 organization with diverse cultural perspectives
 (multicultural stage)? (p. 15)

By using a phenomenological overlay on the MCO approach further complicates this model by asking whether the change agents could even be seen with such precision and accuracy? What do even unsuccessful individual change agents imbue into the system that nuances the concept of multicultural organizational development as being mutually changed? Both agree, however, that the focus needs to be the particular to find insight into the experience of the whole system. Jackson and Holvino (1988) point out that an uninterrupted focus on the mean as the all-encompassing story of all data sets will invariably bury voices and perspectives that are most often in pain or distress.

The particular IS the story. Additionally, there are obvious common examples of rightly emphasizing the margins in other academic disciplines such as journalism. For example, we are currently experiencing one of the worst financial scenarios for our country since the Great Depression. If I applied traditional mean/outlier logic to this situation, I would find a truncated data set that indicates most people paying their bills on time and maintaining employment. Likewise, I suspect that we would be horrified at journalists who ignored the voices of those in unemployment lines or people living in tent cities simply because the experience of these individuals did not figuratively cluster around a mean. In essence, to inadvertently overlook, or purposely omit, the margin *as a standard rule of research* is to miss the point of inquiry altogether, namely to know a phenomenon in all its various forms, however variable these forms may arise.

It is for this reason that I carefully choose phenomenology for an inquiry into the religious conversion experience, because so much of the story of conversion is not about what happens to the typical person in any particular religious identity who is born into and remains a member of a particular faith community. Rather, phenomenology lifts up the experience of the person who does not fit the trend and may allow me to learn about religious experience as a whole from an outsider perspective. Through a phenomenological inquiry that places an emphasis on understanding meaning as a process between places, people, and concepts, the voices of the margins are given room not just to *be*, but to become something new in the process. Phenomenology allows me to see what has always been there, but is only now being uncovered and seen for the first time. Thus, I believe that this approach fundamentally allows for a radically fresh (and yet, ironically, not new at all) perspective that privileges displaced narratives (often seen as *in between*) to give a better understanding and description of the center from outside the center.

Right Relationship with Participants: A “Being With”

We live in the same world, but in different worlds. The differences come partly from our living in different places. If you live to the east of a mountain and I to the west, my world will have a mountain blocking its sunrises, and yours its sunsets. But—depending on what we want out of the world—our worlds can also differ even when we stand in the same place. A painter, a skier, and a miner looking at a mountain from the same side will see different mountains. (Bhikkhu, 2008, p. 7)

If I am attracted to phenomenology, because of the inherently open posture it takes with respect to all voices, including those at the margins, then I must not inadvertently create an oppressive relationship with my participants where I position

myself as *the doctoral student* (and thorough possessor of knowledge... and a good deal of hubris) who comes to study the *lowly subject*, to poke and prod it to give up its story for my own consumption. Though unusual at first, the position of doctoral student vis-à-vis co-researchers needs to be one of egalitarian relationship in power where meaning is co-constructed through the dialogic process.

Bhikkhu's quote above suggests the *raison d'être* of phenomenology has to do with the notion that any phenomenon has much more embedded within and around it than what is simply empirically *there*. Instead, there are many realities and overlapping individual worlds that create meaning for those who inhabit it, meaning that can often be described in words and narrative. Indeed, the task of phenomenology is to find insight by looking under, beneath, and around the words of my co-researchers; and that meaning is found through my questions and interaction with them. For what reason should my world supersede the world of another? Instead, phenomenology allows the material world to exist in a myriad of relationships with those who inhabit and perceive it. And to understand these complex worlds, all perspectives need to be plumbed for meaning and insight.

Maintaining vigilance. Van Manen (2003) reminds me that during the rendering of narrative, I must maintain vigilance to the co-equal relationship to maintain an ethical *and meaningful* stance as I render the human experience I have been given. I must *be* with my co-researchers. He says:

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science which studies persons. In research terminology one often uses 'subjects' or 'individuals' to refer to the persons involved in one's study. But as W.H. Auden (1967, October) once said, 'individual' is primarily a biological term to classify a tree, a horse, a man, a woman; while the term 'person'

refers to the uniqueness of each human being. ‘As persons, we are incomparable, unclassifiable, uncountable, irreplaceable...’ phenomenology is, in a broad sense, a philosophy or theory of the unique; it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable. (pp. 6-7)

Though I value the co-equal relationship with the participants of the study, ultimately, I must continually ask myself these questions: What should a phenomenologist do with these narratives? Of what do I need to be mindful when I interpret the multiplicity of these perspectives? The deceptively simple and simultaneously complex answer is that I must *render* these perspectives back to the participants and to the reader of my work, depicting or representing something that may not have been seen or noticed before. The word *render* comes from the Old French term *rendre* meaning to “give back, represent, reproduce”. But the word implies much more than simply a mimic function. It also has roots that imply melting, where several items may come together to produce a purer, concentrated form. Indeed, to render is to return something, but that which is returned is also given something new to make it more visible and valuable. The word depict also conveys similar meaning to the word render. From the Latin term *depingere*, to depict means to “represent in colors.” The implication is that an artistic metaphor of phenomenological experience allows me to see life with an enhanced sense of living color that brings nuance into bright relief. Thus, to successfully render or depict phenomenological narrative, this approach requires that I consciously reveal that which cannot be seen clearly from within the phenomenon.

Uncovering voice through conversation. To have a commitment to render or depict narrative also emphasizes a different orientation to *how* data are gathered. Perhaps the most obvious difference between phenomenological method and other qualitative

approaches is the disruption of the *interview*, in favor of a more co-equal *conversation*.

Unlike the interview (which reduces a participant to a scrutinized other, even with the taxonomic term “individual”), a conversation invites me to work with people as beings with unique viewpoints of their own that do not readily lend themselves to being governed by my perspective. Quite the opposite is true. A conversation allows me to be taught by them so that I may uncover in their stories something new that they may not have noticed. Levinas (1979) clearly captures this idea as follows:

To approach the other in conversation is to welcome his [sic] expression, in which at each instant he [sic] overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed, this conversation is a teaching [*enseignement*]. (p. 51)

If the point of the conversation is to be taught by the co-researchers, then the corresponding process must be one of open questioning. Gadamer (1989) suggests that open questioning needs to be more than a static experience of asking for confirmation of suspected truths. Rather, questioning is an art that allows the people in conversation to explore a topic where cherished opinions are left behind in favor of fresh exploration into uncharted territory. Gadamer says:

To question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the ‘art’ of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion. A person who possesses this art will himself search for everything in favor of an opinion. Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking

(which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter). (p. 367)

Thus, if I am to enter into right relationship with persons in this study, approaching them as subjects in need of classification or theory imposition is to do violence to the premise that brought me to phenomenology and this research topic in the first place. Instead, I use an approach guided by van Manen, Levinas and Gadamer to maintain a healthy, co-equal relationship with the people in this study. Simply, this methodological approach preserves (to the extent possible) the sense that I am researching the phenomenon with other people in a joint endeavor to find deeper meaning in dialogue and textual analysis. And as the researcher, I will discover subterranean meaning not readily visible to my participants.

Which Phenomenology?

To uncover phenomenology as a process of understanding and creating knowledge, I first must firmly establish the *epistemological approach* that phenomenology takes to knowledge, in general. Though this is a vast oversimplification, phenomenology can be characterized as having two main branches: descriptive and hermeneutic. Descriptive phenomenology precedes hermeneutic phenomenology, because it was developed first through the philosophy of Husserl (1970) and is the general foundation of all phenomenology. In turn, hermeneutic phenomenology came about through the work of Heidegger (1962) and later philosophers as a “corrective” response to the weaknesses of descriptive phenomenology.

Though both share certain values such as an intense scrutiny of “the things themselves,” it is necessary to discuss the differences between these two phenomenologies, because each advocates a very different research posture vis-à-vis the

researched. Generally, descriptive phenomenology advocates a more distal or “neutral” approach to the phenomenon to address issues of bias, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to address bias by an *intentional and transparent involvement* of the researcher in a very proximal research process.

Because of the absolutist nature of “neutrality” as a concept, I am quite skeptical regarding the possibility of realizing a true descriptive phenomenology in practice. Though hermeneutic phenomenology is more complicated in its execution, I believe that it also lays bare any possible bias on my part without shielding it under the guise of a neutral stance. Thus, my choice to use hermeneutic phenomenology is discussed below with specific attention to: 1) mining the foundational nature of descriptive phenomenology for positive and useful methodological suggestions, and 2) utilizing the corrective features of hermeneutic phenomenology. I make use of a wheat metaphor to illustrate my thinking process.

Descriptive Phenomenology: Separating Wheat from Chaff

Just as threshing ultimately winnows the husk away and leaves a farmer with valuable seeds, I also undergo a process with the philosophy of phenomenology that asks me to consider its nature in uncovering knowledge. The strength of any form of phenomenology is its ability to deeply describe “the particular” in very nuanced ways. As a researcher, it allows me to lift narratives that would otherwise be lost were it not for this close attention to detail. Yet what is my relationship to that which is described? Do my descriptions say more about me than what I am describing? Can the phenomenon fully speak for itself, particularly if it is hidden? I can only see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears. Thus, is it possible to circumscribe my own Being as I interact

with the phenomenon I wish to describe? These questions point to the crossroads of phenomenology where a researcher can suggest that perfect description can be produced entirely outside of the researcher... or that it cannot. Ruminating on these questions becomes the metaphorical threshing of descriptive phenomenology where I seriously consider whether I can ever truly achieve Husserl's desired transcendent state (which he calls *bracketing* or *epoche*) when viewing religious conversion.

In answering these questions, descriptive phenomenology is not completely flawed. It does contain kernels of truth that carry on into hermeneutic phenomenology. As such, the metaphoric wheat of descriptive phenomenology is clear to me; the "wheat" is the humility to allow a phenomenon to speak for itself while the "chaff" is the need for bracketing. In the endeavor to find deep phenomenological meaning with a phenomenon, I cannot presume to speak on behalf of the participants when they clearly can *and should* speak for themselves. My relationship with the phenomenon and its people must be one of equality and genuine engagement, not removed distance. Thus, of Husserl's descriptive phenomenological approach, I retain his visceral sense that research should want to go to "the things themselves." Below is a memory of mine that illustrates my *a-ha* moment around this central virtue of descriptive phenomenology.

Descriptive phenomenology's wheat: The things themselves.

Newsflash: On October 24, 2006, I started my morning as I do any other: watching CNN (the Cable News Network) to get a daily dose of "reality." CNN was providing a live feed from a joint news conference in Baghdad, Iraq featuring U.S. General Casey and then U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Khalilzad about the recent "progress" there. During my short visit into this newscast, it became obvious that an Iraqi reporter was repeatedly trying to gain the attention of the two men conducting the news conference. Despite the animation of the Iraqi reporter, Casey and Khalilzad would

select one of the western journalists: BBC, CBS, and The Washington Post. Prior to moving to a particular Washington Post reporter, the Iraqi reporter shouted, “What about an Iraqi question?” Casey and Khalilzad said they would get to him next and provided space for the Washington Post reporter to proceed. As Casey and Khalilzad finished (non) answering the Post reporter’s questions, they gestured to the Iraqi reporter to begin. As the reporter introduced himself in an obviously Arabic accent, CNN chose that single moment to pan back to the main newsroom, where the anchor, Miles O’Brien, summed up all the pertinent points of the news conference, and proceeded to the next story. I was completely incensed...

In the above example, creating room for an Iraqi question would have been an excellent example of returning to “the things themselves.” Instead, non-Iraqi voices and perspectives were allowed to frame the conversation and theorize reality for a non-Iraqi audience. In this example, even a descriptive phenomenological approach would have been preferable to what transpired.

At that moment, it became obvious to me how steeped in post-positivism my worldview had been since my Master’s degree program. My own personal and professional life experiences and endless examples of “subjective perspective” in the academy have reshaped my worldview completely. Seeing the above incident became a critical moment where I could clearly see myself and the cultural lenses I always wear. And right before my eyes, I could see that the war in Iraq was being constructed for me by the two men in front as they answered questions and selected new reporters, the questions these reporters asked, and the time allotted to coverage of this news conference. Though the reporters were benign in their intent to represent the Iraqi perspective, they never actually *let an Iraqi speak* or ask a question. And when this opportunity did present itself, this Iraqi person was not deemed important enough to stay on the air for the

news consumption of an American audience. In that moment, that Iraqi reporter had been *structured out of existence*, becoming an invisible and silent entity about which I could only ponder and pontificate from a removed distance. It was precisely that unnecessary distance that bothered me. It was a distance to which I had become accustomed. It was the distance of positivism.

At that time, I truly *felt* that I deeply understood Husserl's (1975) cry that "we want to go back to the things themselves" (*Wir wollen auf die 'Sachen selbst' zurückgehen*) (p. 252). If I want to understand what is going on in the world (in this single example, the situation in Iraq), it is essential that I create room so that others may speak for themselves, because my cultural baggage and biases can get in the way. Simply, in order to have accurate and precise knowledge, the things must speak for themselves. To do this enormous, yet crucial, task of description, I must then dwell on all the "things themselves," i.e., the persons and their words to see what stands behind what is said or possibly omitted.

Descriptive phenomenology's chaff: Hints of Descartes. Though I deeply appreciate and adhere to Husserl's direction and orientation to descriptive phenomenology, I cannot directly follow his footsteps in research *execution*. Despite his enthusiasm for minimizing the effects of his own biases on scientific research, Husserl's research requirement to totally "bracket" ones biases ironically reflects and reinforces a *positivist* tendency for totality, purity, duality, and finality. Husserl sought to achieve bracketing by entering a transcendental (i.e., transcending himself) state by completely divorcing his inner chatter, wisdom, and/or theorizing as he observes his phenomenon. Through complete separation, descriptive phenomenology mimics traditional scientific

approaches to the construction of knowledge where the researcher is theoretically always separate from the researched. The difficulty I have with Husserl's approach is not the end goal (which on its face is admirable). My methodological concern rests in the means to reach that end. I strongly believe that true descriptive phenomenology is ultimately unattainable, because under this form of phenomenology, "good research" is paradoxically described as a Platonic ideal that real people are supposed to bring about in an imperfect world.

While Moran (2000) also captures (what I believe is) Husserl's positivist error, he stops short of drawing the logical conclusion this error would imply. Initially, Moran simply describes Husserl's espousal of a *purely* descriptive phenomenology as another iteration of the "Cartesian project." He says: "Husserl maintained the thrust of interpreting phenomenology as transcendental idealism and regularly interpreted his philosophy in terms of the Cartesian project... saying that transcendental phenomenology may be termed a *neo-Cartesianism*, though one which takes up Descartes' attitude rather than any of the doctrinal content of his philosophy" (p. 138). It is not that Moran explicitly critiques Husserl's approach. Rather, I believe that Moran shies away from the serious difficulty implied in having a Cartesian "attitude" without its logical "content." Is it truly possible to take on Descartes' "attitude" of perfect clarity and duality, and not the "doctrinal content" to bring this perfect clarity and duality about? In providing Husserl's approach with a philosophical loophole, I believe that Moran misses an opportunity to critique the weakness of descriptive phenomenology where "attitude" and "content" are not separated from one another.

Thus, I suggest that the totality implied in a transcendental, descriptive phenomenology is simply not possible, because it rejects and simultaneously re-creates positivism (a positivist phenomenology?) where complicated ambiguity is forsaken in favor of clarity and scientific respectability and reductionism. In the real world, I see this as unachievable. I just do not believe that people can transcend their own personal, social, and cultural lenses when viewing or experiencing a phenomenon. If I am to allow for Descartes' decidedly dualistic and mechanistic "attitude" toward reality, then I must also allow for the logical *possibility* of Descartes' positivist conclusions as well. Said another way, Husserl's transcendental approach only ends up offering a critique of how data are *interpreted* within a Cartesian framework (i.e., the *content* of knowledge), but stops short of reflexively understanding that he continues to gather phenomenological data under the same positivist constraints that he critiques (i.e. the *process* of knowledge). I wish to take both the content and process of knowledge into consideration when viewing my phenomenon. Thus, when my reflective threshing is done, I seek to retain the virtue of descriptive phenomenology (its relentless need to return to the phenomenon) while rejecting its ideation of pure transcendentalism. Through this process, I come to understand that I need hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate my phenomenon.

Arriving at Hermeneutics

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a research philosophy that creates meaning around a phenomenon through the process of interpretation (of the phenomenon itself or textual descriptions of it). Gadamer (1989) illuminates its beginnings as follows:

The intention and fulfillment of meaning belong essentially to the unity of meaning, and like the meanings of the words that we use, every existing thing that has validity for me possesses correlatively and by virtue of its nature an "ideal

universality of actual and potential experiencing modes of givenness.” Thus was born the idea of “phenomenology”—i.e. bracketing all positing of being and investigating the subjective modes of givenness... This exploration of the “I” as phenomenon is not exploring the “inner perception” of a real “I,” nor is it the mere reconstruction of “consciousness”—i.e., the relation of the contents of consciousness to a transcendental “I” pole, but it is a highly differentiated theme of transcendental reflection. In contrast to the mere givenness of the phenomena of objective consciousness, a givenness in intentional experiences, this reflection constitutes a new dimension of research. (pp. 244-245)

As Gadamer suggests, phenomenology is a process that suggests that all meaning is co-created by the observer and the observed (regardless of whether it is a being or a world), where each is engaged in “modes of givenness” that are deeply embedded in subjective reality. Though it promises to be more complicated, working within a hermeneutic framework also offers a context in which bias is more transparent during phenomenological research.

As mentioned above, the single most significant turn in phenomenology came when Husserl’s student, Martin Heidegger, arrived at his stark disagreement with Husserl about the ability to transcend oneself in conducting human science investigations. With this disagreement, Heidegger (1962) distinguished hermeneutic phenomenology from its progenitor, descriptive phenomenology. Whereas Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology sought to *lose* the self to enter a state of complete awareness, Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach suggests that bracketing simply was not possible *or even desirable*, and that knowledge could and should only be gained by going to “the things themselves” *within the complexity of our own self-aware Being (Dasein)*, a sense of Being that exists with others in a co-constructed world filled with multiple points of view. It is precisely the

concept of *Dasein* that allows hermeneutic phenomenology to make sense, because even the word *Dasein* (*Da*: there, and *Sein*: being) implies a being creating meaning in a mutually reflexive process of engagement with the existential world around that being (time, place, body, and relationship).

***Dasein* as foundation: Co-constructed essence.** *Dasein* is a crucial concept in undertaking hermeneutic phenomenology, because anything that *Dasein* encounters becomes text in the phenomenological process. It is precisely this sense of co-constructed meaning (with a sense of multiplicity carried within) coupled with the necessary context created through connection to place that ultimately becomes foundational text in phenomenological inquiry. Shunryu Suzuki (2006) writes:

A wonderful painting is the result of the feeling in your fingers. If you have the feeling of the thickness of the ink in your brush, the painting is already there before you paint. When you dip your brush into the ink, you already know the result of your drawing, or else you cannot paint. So before you do something, “being” is there, the result is there. Even though you look as if you were sitting quietly, all your activity, past and present, is included; and the result of your sitting is also already there. You are not resting at all. All the activity is included within you. That is your being. (p. 128)

The quote above is more than an explanation of how painting or meditating work. It also contains within it the brightest illumination of *Dasein*’s experience of the world. Being is not created or understood as hermetically isolated or atomized individuals. Instead, *Dasein* suggests that every part of Being is influenced and developed by everyone and everything around *Dasein*; that, in fact, no one is an island unto him/herself. This affects phenomenological inquiry, because to understand a phenomenon in all of its rich meaning, it is necessary to explore the Being with and in its

context. It will affect my study in the sense that I must understand my participants with all of their background to have a sense of what created meaning in their own conversion experience.

Heidegger's (1962) philosophy is fundamentally an implosion of the subject/object distinction that had dominated Western thought since the time of Plato. As mentioned above, Heidegger accomplishes this implosion through his nuanced understanding of *Dasein*, where a person's Being is always porously permeated by prior fields of meaning. In essence, Heidegger's philosophy suggests that our collective understanding of distinct subjects is illusion. There is only Being.

Content of *Dasein*: Necessary prejudices. *Dasein* contains within it a wealth of experiences, needs, biases, and motivations that aid in the construction of meaning. Though it may appear counter-intuitive, it is these biases and unbracketed expressions of self that give *Dasein* its potent strength in creating meaning. In other words, to be involved in the construction of "primordial knowledge," I suspect that the Enlightenment ideal of removing *prejudice* from all methods of inquiry can itself be logically flawed and impoverishes more mystical *ways of knowing* in an effort to impose reason as the sole arbiter of truth. Indeed, this creates a very limited view of reality, even for worthy issues such as a socially just education. Perhaps questioning (as opposed to blindly ignoring the presence of) prejudice would allow for greater understanding of what we collectively carry as social beings. Gadamer (1989) suggests that prejudice itself helps construct meaning within and outside an individual, well outside the grasp of what is strictly reasonable. He says:

The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real

thrust. In light of this insight, it appears that historicism, despite its critique of rationalism and of natural law philosophy, is based on the modern Enlightenment and unwittingly shares its prejudices. And there is one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence: the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power. (p. 270)

The idea behind Gadamer's statement is that there are some kinds of knowledge that are not readily understood or grasped by reason and methods resting on reason. Or put another way, just because *mythos* does not explicitly use the Enlightenment's *logos* as a mode of understanding, does not mean that it cannot yield truth on some level (as is implied by the binary). It does not logically follow that the use of *logos* will produce a *correct* understanding and the use of *mythos* will correspondingly produce the *incorrect* understanding. Gadamer concludes:

All mythical consciousness is still knowledge, and if it knows about divine powers, then it has progressed beyond mere trembling before power (if this is to be regarded as the primeval state), but also beyond a collective life contained in magic rituals (as we find in the early Orient). It knows about itself, and in this knowledge, it is no longer simply outside itself... The overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice, and removing it opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity, but also our historical consciousness. (pp. 274, 276)

Gadamer's concerns about entirely removing prejudice from the parameters of knowledge signals a warning. He suggests that a total reliance on reason runs the risk of constructing an illusion where we see ourselves and the knowledge we create as being timeless and disconnected from the particularities of the people and the times in which we and our knowledge are constructed. In other words, I *want* to include an overt and

transparent rendering of our prejudices to emphasize how deeply historical our knowledge actually is, particularly within the phenomena of human social interaction.

I believe that Gadamer's suggestion that prejudice can play a useful role in constructing certain knowledge makes sense (though it sounds counter-intuitive at first), because prejudice forces an individual to recall knowledge's essential source and inherent limitations (the limitations of a historicized Self). Thus, this broad understanding of the role prejudice can play (when properly scrutinized) can actually *enhance* my understanding of reality and becomes significant in moving social justice forward in meaningful and noticeable ways.

Process of *Dasein*: An ancillary hermeneutic circle of one. Though it would appear that a rejection of pure bracketing (or *epoche*) opens hermeneutic philosophy to Enlightenment criticism of prejudice and bias, Heidegger (1962) simultaneously addresses this criticism as he distinguishes descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology from each other. He rejects a Husserlian approach to phenomenology (where people somehow become pure knowledge or *logos* in understanding the phenomena in question) by also formulating a definition of *Dasein* that *transcends* its inherent bias by seeking truth that is co-constructed with its bias. Heidegger states, "Every disclosure of Being as the *transcendens* is transcendental knowledge. *Phenomenological truth (disclosedness of Being)* is *veritas transcendentalis* (emphasis in original) (p. 62). In other words, Being (or *Dasein*) can investigate phenomena, because *Dasein* is the *necessary component* to create the very truth (*veritas*) that transcends the observation. Thus, a hermeneutic approach to phenomenology transcends, but not in the way implied by the word itself or its use in descriptive phenomenology. This is a kind of transcending within. Rather than

stepping outside the phenomenon and describing something from a vast open space in between, hermeneutics transcends by diving deep inside the phenomenon to render an account of what *Dasein(s)* experiences.

To create this necessary self-aware process, hermeneutic phenomenology requires the use of a hermeneutic circle as a reflective tool to aid in the uncovering of existence and the myriad of details that comprise it. So necessary is this hermeneutic circle, Heidegger vigorously defends the circle's use as ancillary to the process of constructing knowledge. In this way, this figurative circle becomes a recursive process by which *Dasein* interacts with its surrounding world in hermeneutic discourse. Heidegger (1962) states:

But if we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just 'sense' it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up... It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves. (emphasis in original) (pp. 194-195)

In the above quote, using a hermeneutic circle challenges even the basic assumptions about what "scientific" knowledge is, because a scientific process of knowledge acquisition is one where disembodied theorizing (later applied to an experience for confirmation or refutation) is vulnerable to the criticism of unwittingly producing its own answers through the limited questions it asks. In other words, a scientific process may

not be flexible enough to allow for the unexpected or may create a pre-ordained set of possible answers or explanations to a phenomenon.

Instead, a hermeneutic analysis seeks a more inductive process where the things themselves precede “fore-structures” and invite a reflective examination of *Dasein*’s reaction and insights. Through this inductive process of rendering knowledge through a hermeneutic circle, my academic and cultural biases; i.e., theory, (which Heidegger calls “fore-having, sight, and conception”), can be set aside to allow the things to reveal themselves. In turn, these things will reveal “primordial” knowledge that my biases would simply cover up or ignore prior to the revelation. Thus, attaining this level of “primordial” knowledge *must* utilize the hermeneutic circle (a process that purposely counteracts theoretical bias), instead of simply, and perhaps naively, asserting that my *logos* will transcend its own culturally and historically inscribed bias through the force of will or desire alone.

An aside: The (il)legitimate use of Heidegger. There is just no way around the fact that Heidegger, one of the most brilliant minds in phenomenology, was a Nazi at one point in his life. Time and again, in and out of conversations with colleagues familiar with phenomenology, I would discuss this dilemma. And time and again, I would bump up against the same issue: is it ethical (or egregiously reprehensible) to use Heidegger’s work (the work of a Nazi) as a philosophical guide for my own research? I find that my attraction to Heidegger’s work smacks of irony as I think about how my own research interests are so clearly pointed in a direction of promoting multiculturalism, social justice, and an intellectual posture that embraces difference. Indeed, my values and that of Nazism could not be further apart. When I found that I could not reconcile Heidegger to

the scathing critiques of my fellow phenomenologists and the quiet and pointed concerns of my own conscience, I thought I would have to leave Heidegger behind. And then I had the privilege of reading the insightful work of bell hooks (1994).

During her own intellectual struggles with racism in the academy, hooks discovered the seminal work of Paulo Freire (2000). For hooks, the ideas in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* opened a vista that had been previously closed to her. It gave her language to describe her previously unnamed reality (in much the same way that Heidegger does for me). And yet, within the pages of Freire's book were clear examples of the sexism hooks had been fighting her whole life. How would (or could) she reconcile herself to use of his theories when embedded within was evidence of Freire's flawed personal nature? Her answer, brilliant in its simplicity, was to *have the theory interrogate the very vehicle through which the theory is conveyed*. Hooks says, "There is no need to apologize for the sexism. Freire's own model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation of this flaw in the work. *But critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal*" (emphasis added) (p. 49). Essentially, hooks claims that dismissing Freire's work for its sexism is an easy and disingenuous exit. Instead, hooks asks us to stay in the struggle, because Freire's own theory transcends and atones for its sexist origins by re-examining those origins in a critical light. And as I read hooks' example, I thought to myself, "And the same is true of Heidegger" or any other flawed intellectual.

For those not ready to accept such a simple explanation, hooks also elaborated on how she came to fully embrace Freire (flaws and all) by providing a counter-critique to those who would throw away Freire's knowledge and language solely because of his personal deficiencies. In a lengthy and animated defense, hooks asserts that neglecting or

destroying knowledge is an unconscionable act that can only come from a profoundly privileged and arrogant place; i.e., people *in need* do not look askance at such gifts.

Using a contemporary issue (and metaphor) of water use, hooks explains:

I came to Freire thirsty, dying of thirst (in that way that the colonized, marginalized subject who is still unsure of how to break the hold of the status quo, who longs for change, is needy, is thirsty), and I found in his work (and the work of Malcolm X, Fanon, etc.) a way to quench that thirst. To have work that promotes one's liberation is such a powerful gift that it does not matter so much if the gift is flawed. Think of the work as water that contains some dirt. Because you are thirsty, you are not too proud to extract the dirt and be nourished by the water. For me this is an experience that corresponds very much to the way individuals of privilege respond to the use of water in the first world context. When you are privileged, living in one of the richest countries in the world, you can waste resources. And you can especially justify your disposal as something you consider impure. (p. 50)

In the above passage, hooks suggests that Freire's work is useful, because it fills a void of intellectual and spiritual resources, a lack of language necessary for emancipating oppressed people. It simply provides more than what was there before. Even if what is given is not absolutely perfect, having more can be sufficient and just in time. It is that sufficiency and just-in-time-ness implied in the word "more" that allows me to see beyond Heidegger as more than the man he was. Phenomenology redeems him, because it is a philosophy of a single Being containing within it more than what meets the eye. I believe that we are all *more*.

And what would be the philosophy that repudiates its own philosopher? It is the foundational philosophy of more within phenomenology, where all people are all more than simply an individual. Heidegger exalted the role of humankind and *humanitas* as the fundamental seat of Being, because of the consciousness inherent in *every* person. It was

not only found in Germans or Europeans... but in all persons, including Jews, homosexuals, Roma, and the myriad of other persons whom the Nazis hunted and killed. Of this relationship between humanity and Being, Heidegger (1993b) movingly speaks of the noble burden of Being that being human necessarily implies. He says:

But the essence of man consists in his being more than merely human, if this is represented as 'being a rational creature.' 'More' must not be understood here additively, as if the traditional definition of man were indeed to remain basic, only elaborated by means of an existentiell postscript. The 'more' means: more originally and therefore more essentially in terms of his essence. But here something enigmatic manifests itself: man is in thrownness. This means that man, as the ek-sisting counter-throw [*Gegenwurf*] of Being, is more than animal rationale precisely to the extent that he is less bound up with man conceived from subjectivity. Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being. Man loses nothing in this 'less;' rather, he gains in that he attains the truth of Being. He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being's truth. (p. 245)

Moreover, humanity's proximity to Being is not the only place where Heidegger recognizes the sanctity of every individual. In his discussion of "value," Heidegger heavily criticizes even the naming of value as a concept, because of the subjugated violence it necessarily does to what is valued. By naming value, it implies that something *valuable* must be *valuable for estimation by people* as opposed to having intrinsic value in Being. Surely, the most valuable of values is the sanctity of human life?! Heidegger's own words condemn his Nazi affiliations:

To think against 'values' is not to maintain that everything interpreted as 'a value'—'culture,' 'art,' 'science,' 'human dignity,' 'world,' and 'God'—is valueless. Rather, it is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as 'a value' what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of

something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's [sic] estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every valuing, even where it values positively, is subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets being: be valid – solely as the objects of its doing. (p. 251)

Indeed, to place value on a person at all is to create the possibility or opportunity for a person to be objectified. Heidegger's criticism is that all people are beyond value, because people should not be objectified and subjected to measurement of utility.

Succinctly, I believe the use of Heidegger's work is akin to the continued use of Freire's work. Heidegger's philosophy continues to be a quenching of the "parched earth" of understanding human existence and behavior. It gives people more than what they had before, especially when there was lack. In essence, I let Heidegger's being "Be," and see where his illumination leads. This is fundamentally the object of his doing as well as being.

Also, with such an involved research topic such as religious conversion, identity formation, and engagement of the Other, *not* using Heidegger would be wasteful and unproductive to my own goals of creating understanding of these topics. Moreover, I believe that creating new understandings of human experience through illumination of the essence of those experiences redeems Heidegger's *philosophy* (as opposed to the man) as this philosophy counters the forces of bigotry, hatred, and misunderstanding in our world.

Hermeneutic encounters: More than one in the circle. Though rich worlds of meaning can be constructed with *Dasein*'s solitary interaction within its own context, meaning is so much richer when one *Dasein* reaches toward another. Indeed, when a

sovereign Other enters *Dasein*'s world, it creates a cascading avalanche of new meaning. It is this expansion of the hermeneutic circle to include an-Other *Dasein* that allows for the disruptive possibilities contained within genuine dialogue. Gadamer and Dottori (2004) seek to enrich the creation of "primordial knowledge" through the Heideggerian hermeneutic circle's inclusion of the complex process of interaction between an "I" and a "Thou" (or utilizing Heidegger's terminology: a *Dasein* interacting with another *Dasein*). In discussing the process of becoming aware, Gadamer and Dottori say:

The genuine meaning of our finitude or our 'thrownness' consists in the fact that we become aware, not only in our being historically conditioned, but especially in our being conditioned by the other. Precisely in our ethical relation to the other, it becomes clear to us how difficult it is to do justice to the demands of the other or even simply to become aware of them. The only way not to succumb to our finitude is to open ourselves to the other, to listen to the 'thou' who stands before us. (p. 29)

In the above quote, Gadamer and Dottori press the need for *Dasein* to maintain an intentionally open (even vulnerable) posture of awareness to the possibility of the Other. He was concerned that awareness of the totality of the Other can be precluded if *Dasein* wishes to solidify meaning around itself, forcing the Other to fit within the current structures of meaning. Instead, *Dasein* must seek and purposely allow for the Other, creating the possibility of dialogue, knowing that it will cause a metaphoric earthquake in its world by restructuring all the meaning around it.

But how can this great open posture be accomplished? How can I know that the Other before me is not forced to conform to my expectations? Gadamer and Dottori suggests that the only way to achieve this task is to find oneself in conversation with the Other where I am open to new vistas and possibilities through that process. For Gadamer

and Dottori (2004), this is the only stable and reliable method to obtain the awareness described above: “One can gain sudden insight in a conversation by means of this spark that lights up between people who are compelled by goodwill to come to an agreement” (p. 36). Thus, any hermeneutic circle that successfully allows for and embraces a sovereign “Thou,” in addition to an “I,” will be stronger for it.

Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Religious Meaning

To have an appreciation for how phenomenology explores the phenomenon of religious conversion, I first require a sense of how phenomenology treats religion generally as a world of discourse. Indeed, capturing the essence of a turn of religious experience necessitates an understanding of the entire surrounding context of religious identification, especially how concepts of God are created and maintained. Hermeneutic phenomenology is particularly suited to this endeavor, because it provides meaning within rich context. What follows is an exploration of how God is conceived considering such questions as: What makes God meaningful? Does God define what is Holy, or is it the reverse? Can any description truly capture the playful and elusive nature of God? What is the nature of our relationship with God?

Fields of Meaning: The Holy and God

Therefore, the Great Master dwells on the substantial and not on the insubstantial; dwells on the fruit and not the flower. (Tao Te Ching. Verse 38, Lines 107-124, in Lao, 2001, p. 176)

As I dig for wild orchids in the autumn fields, it is the deeply-bedded root that I desire, not the flower. (Izumi Shikibu *As I Dig for Wild Orchids*, in Shikibu & Komachi, 1990, p. 138)

The quotes above indicate that it is often tempting to believe that I might have found the truthful answer to a deep question when what I find is pleasing and beautiful. Yet, what if dazzling beauty draws my attention away from real substance? What might facing the non-beautiful reveal? Heidegger (1962) was troubled by the idea that the flower could be mistaken for the fruit when he wrote (extensively) on the topic of religion and the sacred. For Heidegger, the concept of God was more importantly understood as a precedent *holy* in a *worlding* sense, where the Being of Holy is the summation of a complex interwoven relationship between an environment which is already holy (the fruit or root) and the consciousness (God/dess or “the flower”) which derives meaning from that Holy environment (the fruit). In its essence, the Holy is the thrown ontological world that precedes and defines the possibility of God, where God is merely the phenomenologically *ready-to-hand* object emerging from that reality.

Making or inhabiting religious worlds? Benjamin Crowe (2008) describes this worlding approach by using Heidegger’s own terms of differentiation. Crowe alludes to the “sharp distinction between ontic discourse (i.e., discourse about what exists) and ontological discourse (i.e., discourse about structures of meaning or intelligibility)” as a way of understanding how God could be distinct from Holy (p. 49). And of this distinction between an ontic God and an ontological Holy one, Heidegger (1993b) provides an insightful passage:

Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word “God” is to signify. Or should we not first be able to hear and understand all these words carefully if we are to be permitted as men [sic], that is, as ek-sistent creatures, to experience a relation of God to man [sic]? (p. 253)

I wonder if religions lose sight of this concept in their dogma? And can the centrality of a conversion experience be found within this understanding of the Holy? For Heidegger, there is an *a priori* sequence of Being that creates the possibility of God: from Being to Holy to Divinity to what human beings know as “God.” Clearly, this is not an everyday Sunday school lesson.

To logically follow this phenomenological philosophy of the Holy means to arrive at a point where God is *not* the primary or first/*a priori* mover and definer of existence and Being. Rather, God is Herself moved and defined by something more ancient and profound in its sacred being: the Holy itself. Holy is an immutable context and background... a thrown, already-made world in which God finds Herself tightly interwoven in a web of *being with* (*Mitsein*) (Heidegger, 1962). Indeed, She only makes sense in this world She is with the Holy. Deeper still, this context creates the meaning for which *even God* derives a sense of what it means to be God.

As a radically different understanding from our traditional Western conceptions of theology, here God is given a place, appropriate to the existence of the divine, where the sacred is offered and imbued with meaning. And Heidegger is not alone in suggesting an *a priori* existence of Holy to define God. Ironically, he finds agreement with Bertrand Russell, an avowed atheist, who also discusses the *a priori* nature of the Holy. Russell (1957) suggests that the essences of right and wrong precede God’s pronouncement of this binary, and says the following:

Is that difference due to God’s fiat or is it not? If it is due to God’s fiat, then for God himself [sic] there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. If you are going to say, as theologians do, that God is good, you must

then say that right and wrong have some meaning which is independent of God's fiat, because God's fiats are good and not bad independently of the mere fact that He [sic] made them. (p. 12)

In this quote, Russell concludes that if God could not be first; She must not *be* at all. Yet, I refute the suggestion that having a Holy world surrounding God necessarily means that God, strictly speaking, does not exist. It does not logically follow that if God is not first, then She must not exist at all. It only changes the nature of Her existence from being solitary and *above it all* to a being that is interdependent, infinitely, intricately, and inextricably interwoven, with the Holy. It is precisely this conclusion that I believe is central to Heidegger's overall concepts distinguishing *Dasein* (Being there) and placeless being. Even God must follow the rules of the Holy in order for God to make sense to Herself and to us.

When the primacy of God is in question. But what is the effect of having God not be *the* solitary, removed principle? Is it that the worship of God is misplaced... and should that worship be to the Holy? Does the Holy wish to be worshipped... or can it only be experienced? Crowe suggests that Heidegger's philosophy does not subordinate God to the Holy. Rather, God only makes sense because of the Holy. Crowe (2008) says:

Heidegger does not subordinate God or the gods to the "holy," as if the latter were some "super-deity." Instead, the "holy" is a domain of meaning that is tacitly understood in such a way that concrete human encounters with "divine" beings first become possible. That is, the "holy" is what anchors the network of relations in which the gods have religious meaning. (p. 114)

Yet, I am uneasy with quickly drawing Crowe's conclusion, because it appears to soothe conveniently the collective tremors of religious reality with assurances that seem reminiscent of holding the flower and not the root. It is precisely this uneasy question of

primacy or supremacy that makes a religious conversion narrative interesting, because it begs insight into the nature of conversion itself, because it would appear that conversion must happen within a stable field of meaning, even if one moves from one God to another. I suspect Crowe's quote above is a reassertion of Heidegger's *power of Nature* argument where Nature will "have priority and take[s] the lead in the sequence" in communion with humankind and to retroactively apply that back to the world of the Holy (Heidegger, 1962, p. 101). I suspect that this is based in an assumption that God as agent/actor/active principle necessarily trumps the passive principle of the Holy, but I think that assumption expands the power-of-Nature argument beyond the world in which it applies: the mundane, not the Holy.

Announcing place: Harmonizing God and holy. I am uneasy drawing a conclusion with absolute certainty about the power relationship of dominance and subordination between God and the Holy, either way, at all. Can I ever really discern superiority and inferiority within the interwoven context of the Holy? I suspect that this is where religious teaching runs astray. Perhaps it is true (as Crowe suggests) that God is not subordinate to the Holy in a way that I cannot fathom. But it is also certainly true that an *a priori* Holy cannot be subordinate to God either, especially if Holy precedes, causes, and makes meaning of God.

To make sense of this conundrum, I find wisdom in a poem by Mary Oliver (2007) that describes a holistic sense of God and Holy that are not easily distinguished from each other.

Wild Geese
 You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
 are moving across the landscapes,
 over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile, the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things. (p. 21)

In the above poem, I am left with the true Heideggerian essence of *Mitsein* (being with) where I must live with an ambivalence about elevating one over the other in the same way that *Dasein*'s relationship with the world is a complex and ever-growing relationship where World and Being build into each other. It is from this ambiguous connection between God and Holy that I can see my own place relative to them, namely, they announce my place "in the family of things." This phrase is fascinating, because *announcing* place and omnipotently *determining* place are not necessarily the same thing. What meaning exists between God and Holy where our place becomes evident? Are we called by the relationship of God and Holy in the same instinctive way that the geese are called home? Is the announcement of our place for our own benefit or for the benefit of the entire family of things? By having an ambiguously understood relationship between God and Holy, the way is open for phenomenology to raise questions that might have been precluded or sealed away.

Like Oliver's poem, Heidegger (1993b) calls me to recognize that seeing deeply into the ontological world of the Holy is difficult when the ontic manifestation of the

Holy, God, is Herself opaque. I can only hope to understand through *Dasein's* experience of God (and indirect experience of Holy) through Being. Heidegger says:

Through the ontological interpretations of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world, no decision, whether positive or negative, is made concerning a possible being toward God. It is, however, the case that through an illumination of transcendence we first achieve an adequate concept of *Dasein*, with respect to which it can now be asked how the relationship of *Dasein* to God is ontologically ordered. (p. 253)

As in Oliver's poem, Heidegger reveals the disquiet in the logical order of being, but this quote also suggests the need to rest in ambiguity, because "no decision, whether positive or negative, is made" about the logical order for which we seem to yearn. Perhaps I must simply accept the lack of perfect description of God/Holy meaning.

In this sense, the phenomenology of religion disquiets me with a similar analysis (analogous to *Dasein*) to the sacred and is bolstered by Russell's logical conclusion of a deeper origin of good and evil. This conclusion begs a particular question that is "closer" to *Dasein* than the deeper question of the God/Holy relationship. When I enter a state of openness to the divine, with whom am I actually interacting? I suspect that the philosophy of meaningful fields that I have described above would posit an answer that I enter the Holy to meet with God, but that She has simply been there before me. In turn, phenomenology allows me to explore and describe the experience of seeing what has been there all along.

A story of "field:" The world of a hammer. For the purposes of the phenomenon of religious conversion, it is important to understand the nature of *Dasein's* relationship with God (perhaps as a concept, world or supreme Other). In this sense, world does not merely imply the physical surroundings of *Dasein*, but those physical

surroundings as embedded with meaning and relationship to *Dasein*. Hermeneutic phenomenology contains within it a deep exploration of *Dasein*'s relationship with its world through Heidegger's extensive metaphor of *Dasein*'s use of a Hammer. Can a conception of God be analogous to the hammer-world described by Heidegger? What differences or nuances exist between the two that can make a hammer-world a useful metaphor for God (even if it has its limitations)?

Though *Dasein* is a tight focus in exploring the nature of Being, *Dasein* need not (and cannot) exist in a state of vacuum or hermetical isolation from everything else. Even the term *Dasein* implies a relationship with the world in which *Dasein* finds itself. This world even *makes Being a meaningful concept, even to Dasein*. In referring to a "world" or "worlding," I am not specifically limiting myself to the physical world I happen to inhabit, but also include Heidegger's ideas that *meaning* is imbued into that world that makes objects (including ourselves) have purpose and meaning already-at-hand. This deeper definition of world as inhabited meaning can be described through the profoundly simple (and not simple at all) interaction of *Dasein* and a hammer. Heidegger (1962) says:

What we encounter as closest to us (though not as something taken as a theme) is the room; and we encounter it not as something 'between four walls' in a geometrical spatial sense, but as equipment for residing. Out of this the 'arrangement' emerges, and it is in this that any 'individual' item of equipment shows itself. *Before* it does so, a totality of equipment has already been discovered. Equipment can genuinely show itself only in dealings cut to its own measure (hammering with a hammer, for example); but in such dealings as an entity of this kind is not *grasped* thematically as an occurring Thing, nor is the equipment-structure known as such even in the using... The more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly it is

encountered as that which it is—as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific ‘manipulability’ [“*Handlichkeit*”] of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses—in which it manifests itself in its own right—we call ‘readiness-to-hand’ [*Zuhandenheit*]. (p. 98)

But obviously, God is not a hammer. Can worlding, deeply imbued with a visceral sense of *Mitsein*, as a phenomenological concept of meaning-making contain pre-given meaning to an object that is immaterial, unseen, and something only hinted at through whispers, dreams, and intuition? Can God exist in a world that counter-intuitively imbues Her with meaning? Does this leave the definition of God suspect to people who profess that God is beyond all meaning? These questions also develop a deeper tension when God is defined from a particular religious perspective. If God is clearly defined as Yahweh, Vishnu, Gaia, Yemaya, or a host of other specific deities, does that negate the question of worlding around that deity or simply dismiss an inconvenient question?

It would appear that God could be a Heideggerian world, but there is also a sense that God is a Being in and of itself. Can these two concepts be held together? Are they mutually exclusive? I suspect not, though I draw no conclusions with absolute certainty. (Indeed, Levinas (below) asks me to consider a radically different possibility of God and Holy being connected and yet deeply apart.) Instead, Heidegger references a metaphor specifically addressing the status of entity Beings. Specifically, he expresses his awe of the “power of Nature,” where Nature contains within its Being an ordering principle with everything it encounters. Through this metaphor of Nature, Nature and any divine or unseen force are still very much alike in their overall concept of worlding, though they are also understood as entities through the immediate lead they take in creating meaning with *Dasein*. Heidegger (1962) says:

The kind of Being which belongs to these entities is readiness-to-hand. But this characteristic is not to be understood as merely a way of taking them, as if we were taking such 'aspects' into the 'entities' which we proximally encounter, or as if some world-stuff which is proximally present-at-hand in itself were 'given subjective colouring' in this way. Such an Interpretation would overlook the fact that in this case these entities would have to be understood and discovered beforehand as something purely present-at-hand, and must have priority and take the lead in the sequence of those dealings with the 'world' in which something is discovered and made one's own... *Readiness-to-hand is the way in which entities as they are 'in themselves' are defined ontologico-categorically.* [underlining emphasis added, italic emphasis in original] (p. 101)

This quote illustrates the fundamental difference of an entity-being (such as God) from any other world of meaning (such as a hammer). God would be "ready-to-hand," meaning a proactive field of meaning that inserts itself, by definition, upon the arrival of *Dasein*. A hammer, as present-at-hand, cannot lead *Dasein* in the construction of meaning or purpose. Hence, the hammer and God are both necessary co-constructors of meaning, but God initiates the dance with *Dasein* because She is more than "present." God is "ready."

This nuance of God (vis-à-vis an object) is powerful, but is perhaps not "almighty" enough for the tastes of some religions. A read-at-hand God likely does not insist on a single code of meaning for each and every *Dasein*. I wager that this definition of God is flexible in its relationship to human beings, and thus, may be anathema to some. Perhaps this is why so much orthodoxy around many religions seems at odds with their own mystical traditions. Does this mean that a religious conversion, as a movement from one sense of God to another, must include within it a sense of God as a ready-at-

hand field? I suspect that the perception of God as a “worlding” experience may be a component of this process of change.

I believe that the metaphor of Nature representing these concepts of God implies a flexible worlding interaction. Like Nature, God can possibly be understood as a field of meaning that assertively makes the first move in the interaction and dispersal of meaning, because it “must have priority and take the lead” in order to be appropriately defined as divine. Thus, like Nature, God could be understood as a Being existing within a field of meaning that defines God as prior to *Dasein* in its interactions, but not prior to the field of meaning which first defined God.

A counter voice: The primacy of which relationship? I must humbly concede that I cannot know the nature of God and Holy with absolute certainty. What if my Heideggerian understanding of God and Holy is missing an *initial* ingredient in the production of Being: me? Could my own personal ready-to-hand relationship with a divine Other provide the seed of meaning from which the Holy cascades forth? Emmanuel Levinas disrupts Heidegger’s description of the field in relationship with its corresponding object by rejecting the more unified (or total) sense of Heidegger’s approach that the field is dominant and teleological (though Levinas does recognize the field, or what he calls *horizon*, as having a role in defining the meaning of the object). In this sense, the term *object* becomes reductively incorrect in its application to its field. Rather, Levinas uses the term Other to imply the irreducibility of the *stranger* that is dissimilar to the intimacy implied in Heidegger’s *Mitsein*. Levinas (1979) says, “The comprehension of Being in general cannot dominate the relationship with the Other. The latter relationship commands the first. I cannot disentangle myself from society with the

Other, even when I consider the Being of the existent he is” (p. 47). And beyond the irreducibility of the Other, Levinas sees a possibility that the field itself is reinterpreted every bit as much as the Other it enfolds.

The key difference from Heidegger’s *Mitsein* and Levinas’ strange Other is where I place my gaze to gather meaning and what I find there. With *Mitsein*, I take everything in at once, living and non-living, gathering meaning as vision gathers a picture through a wide-angle lens. On the other hand, a strange Other is a living being that demands a tighter gaze on the Other itself, and subsequently brings in other cues from the surrounding field. The difference is subtle, but important, because Levinas’ horizon is not simply shaped, but warped in the process of interpretation of meaning. Levinas calls the question of superiority of field to object when he rhetorically asks, “What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects” (p. 28)!

Levinas’ contribution to the phenomenology of the field of meaning derives from his philosophical exploration of the distinctions between totality and infinity as concepts that explain and provide the space for Being. In the introduction to *Totality and Infinity*, John Wild says:

As Levinas points out, one answer [to basic philosophical questions] is given by the totalizers who are satisfied with themselves and with systems they can organize around themselves as they already are. A very different answer is given by those who are dissatisfied, and who strive for what is other than themselves, the infinitizers, as we may call them. The former seek for power and control; the latter for a higher quality of life. The former strive for order and system; the latter for freedom and creative advance. This leads to the basic contrast which is expressed in the title of the book, between totality on the one hand and infinity on the other. Many examples of the former can be found in

the history of our Western thought. The latter is largely unknown and untried. (p. 17)

Levinas' distinction is not just a critique of the phenomenological philosophy. Rather, he challenges the entire notion of certainty implicit within Western ways of knowing.

Totality is the sense of Western objectivity (including the complete sense of Being that is developed by Heidegger). By contrast, Infinity is that which seeks to go beyond the specific being that is defined and possessed by the group. Only through the alterity of this completely free Being can infinity bring about change.

The major impact this has on the phenomenology of religion is that God is no longer found in the field or even in the object of the field. For Levinas, God is now contained within the infinity that exists between a Self and a completely free and alien Other (or Stranger). God becomes the interaction of the Self and the Other where each are summoned to an ethical relation that is about understanding through communion, not through objectification and absorption.

The escape of meaning: Slippage and *différance*. As much as I am fond of clean explanations and equally clean counter disruptions, I am left with a sense that explaining God as a concept is probably much more complicated than anything expressed above. If God is all-powerful, surely this Being could *Be* more than any single definition or collection of definitions imply. Can God have an *escape clause* in relationship with persons or its own field? Are there pieces or patterns of God that are forever ineffable and beyond all understanding, however paradoxical it may be? Derrida (1978c) suggests that the answer to these questions is a likely (thankfully) *yes*. Unlike Heidegger, who says that the field must presuppose and define the object embraced within its folds of meaning or Levinas who suggests the reverse, Derrida counters that there may be a slippery

relationship between object and its corresponding field, where that *flexibility* precedes both. He calls this flexible looseness of meaning *différance*.

Différance is a hybridized term that boldly portrays a stance of being “different,” but also contains the subtle undertones of the word “defer,” meaning a kind of spatial and chronological displacement that accompanies the sense of alterity inherent in the word “different.” Alan Bass, Derrida’s (1978c) translator, explains the French terms more closely as follows:

The word combined in neither the active nor the passive voice the coincidence of meanings in the verb *différer*: to differ (in space) and to defer (to put off in time, to postpone presence). Thus, it does not function simply either as *différence* (difference) or as *différance* in the usual sense (deferral), and plays on both meanings at once. (p. xvi)

It is precisely this complicated displacement of time and space that appeals to me in complicating Heidegger’s notion of worlding, because it allows for the unexpected and the unfathomable. In this sense, *différance* is like a strobe-like presence that blinks in and out, becoming tantalizing in its absence. This is the Derridian *play* within a system. This *play* adds to (or “supplements,” the term he uses) the overall meaning inherent in the field with an *error term* that prevents meaning from being forever completely and totally defined, even if moments of perfection come to exist on a rare occasion. Essentially, the error term of *play* disturbs and unbalances the perfect Heideggerian quadratic equation of meaning enough to *make* the overall system *respond* to that play. In this sense, the absence of the object also provides meaning back to the field that defines the object. As I ponder the various possibilities of God, this example of Being captures a complex and playful interplay of absence and presence that confounds the ability of language to describe Her. Though play leaves me in an ongoing *in-between* dynamic of reaching and

not fully grasping, I sense that I can come closer to naming a deeper reality around the nature of God.

Specifically, I choose to highlight the concept of *différance* by emphasizing the inverse relationship between supplemental play and the totalizing effect that play works against. Of this relationship, Derrida (1978b) says:

The nature of the field—that is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions... this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in absence—this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. (p. 289)

Of particular note in the above quote is the analysis of *how* the playful object re-imbues meaning back into the field (the extent to which I explore below). Because the field is always *defining* the object, it follows that there is turmoil in the field when the object denies its presence to mirror the field's meaning. Derrida suggests that this newly-created sign, perhaps a symbol invested with representative meaning, first compensates for the absence of the object by filling the unsettling void in anticipation of the object's return and also calls specific attention to the absence of the object (the inherent purpose of the sign). In that moment, the absence and its beacon sign add emphasis to the already unstable nature of the object and imply a *sign-ificant* instability of meaning back into the field itself. In essence, the object leaves a calling card that makes sense within the field and calls the field to respond to the absence, in turn.

This *play*-ful disruption of totality can be taken one step further. While Heidegger suggests that the field of meaning (like the Holy) is *a priori* to the object it contains, Derrida asks me to consider the possibility that *play* (and, hence, *différance*) even precedes the field of meaning, because a lack of totality and stasis is a necessary condition for flexibility of meaning within the field. If the field preceded or led *play*, *play* would cease to have meaningful purpose or even basic function within the field. In other words, for play to be *play*, it must and can not ever be captured in a total field. Otherwise, it would become but one term within that field. Said another way, Peter Pan can never grow up if adulthood is to be a flexible field of meaning. Derrida describes this necessary sequence as follows:

[There is a] tension between play and presence. Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, *play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence*. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around. [emphasis added] (p. 292)

This quote is powerful to me, because it suggests that movement and freedom disrupt presence, and hence, disrupt its absence as well. Can this be the sensation of sensing God even when God is not technically there? As I consider the degree to which field and object engage in a slippery dance, I wonder how much of religious experience can be explained through this lens. Is it possible that much of what people describe as “religious experience” is, in fact, the connection to the sign when the absence of the true Being is most felt? Are people mistaking the sign for the signified? And can God ever truly be captured by a Sign, no matter how complex? Seeking an answer to these questions

suggests that a conversion experience could be an entry into that slippery play between God and Holy. Is conversion a disruption of religious meaning at its most basic level? And if it is, is conversion a way to plumb the depths of religious meaning?

In weighing the various concepts of God above with the somewhat more slippery world posited by Derrida, I believe that my thinking leans in the direction of a world where all the terms do not neatly “add up.” Like Derrida, I suspect that the recursive relationship of presence and definition is likely preceded by a complex form of *play* that undermines all firm definitions and fields. Even *holy* as a field is subject to this slippery play, which only makes God that much more difficult to define or even grasp. Thus, the meaning of *différance* becomes clear... if God is the wholly/holy other, that difference is something that can only be sensed in the playful absence and presence of infinity and wholeness. To see the *différance*, God’s place must defer and allow a sense that I am missing (as in *not hitting the mark*) and missing (as in *sensing an absence*) something, something that demands that I place a sign in its absence to represent what once was there.

Coda: A glance back at Heidegger. In the midst of my exciting immersion in religious phenomenology, a somber friend asked me to reconsider which philosophers would *or should* be appropriate grounding for any phenomenological work, but especially the work that considers the topic of the Holy. My good friend, Dr. Alison Milofsky, asks me to reconsider Heidegger. Given the fact that both of us share a deep commitment to social justice and an affinity for the educational possibilities that phenomenology opens, how could I say “no?”

Milofsky (2009) initially goes to considerable length to support the notion that Heidegger was supportive of the Nazi regime in much more than a passing way. In my estimation, she supports this idea convincingly and to my satisfaction. Therefore, I offer no apologia or obfuscation for Heidegger's ever-growing, troubling, and public commitment to Germany's "Manifest Destiny." Instead, I seek to seriously engage Milofsky's *philosophical* criticism where she suggests that any work using Heidegger is indelibly tainted with the stain of Nazism, because Heidegger's philosophy must stem from his beliefs about the rightness of German National Socialism. She says, "An individual's philosophy emanates from his or her thoughts and, in the case of phenomenology, from lived experience. Can we separate the thoughts in our head from the feelings in our heart where our beliefs reside? And what role does our experience play in shaping the thoughts that form our work? If Heidegger is anti-Semitic, is his philosophy not then inherently anti-Semitic" (p. 132)? Truthfully, Milofsky's question troubled many of my waking hours. Was I doing the right thing? Was I ignoring something significant for the sake of simple convenience? As I read and re-read this passage, I found that my eyes lingered on one word in the final sentence: *inherently*. Indeed, the rightness or wrongness of using Heidegger comes down to whether I can see or dispute an *inherent* connection between Heideggerian *philosophy* and Heidegger's obviously disturbed *beliefs*.

The word *inherent* is a word of necessity and inescapability. If something is *inherent*, it is unavoidable, ceaselessly facing me regardless of which way I turn. It is precisely this unavoidable nature that yields a possible starting place for my exploration. Thus, I start with two questions surrounding the Heideggerian stain: 1) *exactly* where and

how does (did) Nazism surface from this philosophy? 2) Is the surfacing of Nazism from *Dasein* inherent; i.e., must *Dasein* logically lead to Nazism or its ilk?

The answer to the first question is historically clear. Heidegger (2009) does attempt to make use of a deconstructed subject as *Dasein* to justify a spiritually-sanitized Nazism in his infamous *Rectorial Address* where he suggests that he will act as a *Führer* (translated as *leader*) to his university:

Assuming the rectorship means committing oneself to leading this university *spiritually*. The teacher and student body under the rector's leadership will awaken and gain strength only by being truly and collectively rooted in the essence of the German university. This essence will only attain clarity, rank and power, however, when the leaders themselves are first and foremost, and at all times, led by the inexorability of that spiritual mission which impresses onto the fate of the German people the stamp of their history. (p. 108)

Yet, within this quote, the answer to the second question is also subtly revealed. Recall that Heidegger seeks to avoid Platonic weaknesses of subjectivity by defining *Dasein* as dependent on its corresponding field of meaning, the imploded subject/object. It is precisely the weakness of this implosion whereby Heidegger seeks to gain control of *Dasein* to undertake a spiritually inflexible "mission" *required* by that era's historical stamp. In this sense, Heidegger slavishly roots *Dasein* in the era of Nazi Germany (its surrounding toxic milieu) where it is influenced by that history. The problem is that he cannot have a completely rooted, earthly, and historicized *Dasein* undertaking a lofty spiritual (unearthly) goal, because idealized deontological endeavors (such as inflexible spiritual missions) require thinking, rational subjects to undertake them. In other words, Heidegger cannot have it both ways. *Dasein* must either undertake Nazism OR it must

continually commune with its own historical Being, which can, and does, change. Derrida (1989) explains:

On the one hand, Heidegger thus confers the most reassuring and elevated *spiritual* legitimacy on everything in which, and on all before whom, he commits himself, on everything he thus sanctions and consecrates at such a height. One could say that he spiritualizes National Socialism... But, on the other hand, by taking the risk of spiritualizing Nazism, he might have been trying to absolve or save it by marking it with this affirmation (spirituality, science questioning, etc.)... What is the price of this strategy? Why does it fatally turn back against its “subject”—if one can use this word, as one must, in fact? Because one cannot demarcate oneself from biologism, from naturalism, from racism in its genetic form, one cannot be *opposed* to them except by reinscribing spirit in an oppositional determination, by once again making it a unilaterality of subjectivity, even if in its voluntarist form. The constraint of this program remains very strong, it reigns over the majority of discourses which, today and for a long time to come, state their opposition to racism, to totalitarianism, to Nazism, to fascism, etc., and even of the freedom of (the) spirit, in the name of an axiomatic—for example, that of democracy or “human rights”—which, directly or not, comes back to this metaphysics of *subjectivity*. All the pitfalls of this strategy of establishing demarcations belong to this program, whatever place one occupied in it. The only choice is the choice between the tarrying contaminations it assigns. (emphasis in original) (pp. 39-40)

I concur with Derrida’s conclusion that any deontological burden on *Dasein*, *whether good or evil*, ignores its historical, hermeneutic nature. It is not *Dasein*, but that *Dasein*’s ties to its era’s field of meaning that produced Nazism. Thus, it does *not* logically follow that *Dasein*’s “history” must always produce evil as an inherent result, because history changes. Derrida (1989) names this specific history surrounding that *Dasein* when he says:

Nazism was not born in the desert. We all know this, but it has to be constantly recalled. And even if, far from any desert, it had grown like a mushroom in the silence of a European forest, it would have done so in the shadow of big trees, in the shelter of their silence or their indifference but in the same soil... In their brushy taxonomy, they would bear the names of religions, philosophies, political regimes, economic structures, religious or academic institutions. In short, what is just as confusedly called culture, or the world of spirit. (pp. 109-110)

It is precisely to correct *Dasein*'s Achilles Heel, that Derrida introduces the process of deconstruction and play. When *Dasein* understands its own historical moment through deconstruction or creates freedom and space from its history through Derrida's play, it can then safeguard itself against the many influences mentioned above that would otherwise enslave it. Thus, I can only conclude that using Heidegger's philosophy deeply opens hermeneutic possibilities, *and* strictly requires extreme vigilance through the use of Derrida's corrective philosophy, because *Dasein* is weak to unexamined historical circumstance, but is not inherently tainted.

God, Holy, and *Dasein*: Playing with a Duo Already at Play

Much of my consideration of God and Holy has been located, to a certain extent, from my own vantage point as a person without the benefit of omniscient powers. What must the relationship of *différance* between God and Holy look and feel like when I interact with it? How do God and Holy understand me (or each other) when I am in the mix? And what example might help me get a glimpse into that complicated relationship?

A ball: Defying expectations and predictability. Gadamer (1989) provides me an example by which to consider my own *play*-ful relationship among God and Holy, using a metaphor where even my body will recognize a physical, non-verbal lesson.

Specifically, he uses the *physically* real metaphor of the animated, and ever-responsive, ball. Gadamer states:

In order for there to be a game, there has to be, not necessarily literally another player, but something else with which the player plays and automatically responds to his move with a countermove. We are *in* the play. Thus, the cat at play chooses the ball of wool because it responds to play, and ball games will be with us forever because the ball is freely mobile in every direction appearing to do surprising things of its own accord. (pp. 105-106)

A ball is a simple object that somehow entertains and captivates attention *because* of its ability to elude predictability. Simply, I do not necessarily know where the ball will go; therefore, it challenges my sense of control and prescience of the game's outcome.

The Other, with its broad hints of God or concepts of the Divine, can be understood as similar to Gadamer's description of a ball; i.e., as an unpredictable variable in our world. Will we gravitate to this ball-like Other, if only to see what it might do? Or might we refuse to play, because its uncontrolled nature is unsettling or even frightening in this game of life? Delving into the origins of the word "game" may give me a clue to why people may react differently to this Other (and, hence, to a fluid relationship with God).

The word *game* derives from the Old English word *gamen*, meaning "organized amusement or sport," particularly of "wild animals pursued for sport." The origins of the word *game* clearly refer to the sense of hunted game animals, yet the word does not indicate *which* roles both parties will play during the game. Does God pursue me, or do I pursue God? Does the Holy also define me when I am dancing with God? In other words, do I come to see the Other as an unthreatening being in my world (the hunted) that we pursue with leisure and ease? Or do I see this Other as a sly, cunning, and perhaps

dangerous hunter, indicated by its unpredictable nature and its willingness to openly and obviously defy my expectations? Clearly, there must be a sense that the ball-like *unpredictability* of the Other plays a crucial role in understanding whether one is predisposed, or averse to, interaction with this Other. It is precisely this unpredictability that creates the fertile moment of being caught off guard, thereby yielding an opportunity to see, and been seen, anew.

A ball reconsidered: Reduction to object? Even as this metaphor gives insight into how I may view the Other, I am disturbed by the game metaphor's implications as it relates to this Other. There is a point where the metaphor breaks down, because I may be tempted to reduce the Other too far. From my previous consideration of God, I am loathe to render God too completely or perfectly. In either scenario (predisposition or aversion), there is a prejudicing (a pre-judging) of the Other before I have any meaningful information about the Other. In essence, becoming *oriented* to the Other reflexively implies reducing the other from a three-dimensional Being (a Thou) to a mere thing (an object) in my world.

It is this concern to avoid reductive tendencies that significantly adds to the understanding of God and Holy implied by Heidegger and Derrida. Gadamer suggests that this reductive process may be an unfortunate, though necessary, first step in ever (eventually) recognizing the Other as Thou. Gadamer (1989) states:

The immanent data of reflectively examined consciousness do not include the 'Thou' in an immediate and primary way... the 'Thou' does not possess the kind of immanent transcendence that belongs to the objects of experience (*Erfahrung*) in the external world; for every 'Thou' is an alter ego, i.e., it is understood in terms of the ego and, at the same, as detached from it and, like the ego itself, as independent. (p. 250)

In other words, the ego cannot immediately comprehend a Thou, especially a supreme Thou, without first having a sense that the world around the ego is not merely component parts of itself. Instead, the world, and its many Heideggerian worlds, contain autonomous entities, Beings that are quite distinguishable unto themselves. Or as we hopefully learned when we were young children, we are only able to recognize and think of Others when we first minimize our own inflated sense of Self. Thus, *playing* with the Other (and being open to the Derridian play between the Self and the Other) is a necessary step in ever coming to know the Other.

Likewise, the conversion experience implies the possibility of an initially reductive relationship with God and Holy that subsequently blossoms into depth.

The poets have scattered you.
A storm ripped through the stammering.
I want to gather you up again
in a vessel that makes you glad.

I wander in the thousand winds
that you are churning,
and bring back everything I find.

The blind man needed you as a cup.
The servant concealed you.
The beggar held you out as I passed.

You see, I am one who likes to look for things.

I am one who, barely noticed,
like a shepherd,
comes up from behind...
One who dreams of making you complete,
and in that way completes himself. (Rilke, 2005, p. 117)

Rilke investigates this diminished perception of God long after all the attempts of poetry to fully capture God have failed. In seeking to “complete” God, Rilke finds that he is

also completed. Does inadvertently making God small encourage us to seek those parts of God that are vast? What is it that Rilke gathers? It appears that he gathers the many intimate experiences of others. Should I gather something similar to understand God? Is the vastness of God our many relationships with Her? This poem indicates that I might find the complexity of God by turning to what others have found and treasured. Yet to gather those experiences of others, I must be open to the possibility that they will bring stories that encourage me to build a bridge to their experience, that I must entertain a conversion each time, that I must begin with myself. Thus, recognizing a Thou in a religious Other or rejecting this Other will always begin in the same place, a *Dasein* still in discovery of itself.

Phenomenology as Methodology

Though phenomenology is a methodology, it is also a philosophical framework from which a method can be seriously prescribed and followed. Derrida (1978a) describes the science of phenomenology as a necessarily inexact and rigorous process based on the play of the openness of perception and ontological Being. He says:

Differing from mathematical essences, the essences of pure consciousness are not, and in principle cannot be, exact. The difference between exactitude and rigor recognized by Husserl is well known. An eidetic descriptive science, such as phenomenology, may be rigorous, but it is necessarily inexact—I would rather say “anexact”—due to no failure on its part... This is why geometry is a “material” and “abstract” science. It follows that “geometry of experience,” a “mathematics of phenomena” is impossible: this is an “attempt doomed to miscarry.” (p. 162)

With this understanding of the anexact nature of phenomenology, I explain the process by which I will engage with my research phenomenon below.

Engaging with the Other: Actually Entering the Hermeneutic Circle

When considering the various philosophical discussions above as guides for my methodology, one thing is certain: *phenomenology happens in conversation and in the writing of text*. In other words, the root of phenomenological understanding is the simple (and never simple) word. Van Manen (2003) concurs with this assessment as he states, “It is to our words, language, that we must apply all our phenomenological skills and talents, because it is in and through the words that the shining through (the invisible) becomes visible” (p. 130). Van Manen further clarifies how words help me understand the phenomenological content and process of these words through his explanation of *Reductio* and *Vocatio* as basic concepts essential to a phenomenological methodology (elaborately illustrated on his Internet website). Of *Reductio*, van Manen states “The aim of the *reductio* (the reduction or *epoché*) is to reach direct contact with the world by suspending prejudgements, bracketing assumptions, deconstructing claims, and restoring openness” (Friesen & Geissler, 2002). And of *Vocatio*, van Manen states, “The aim of the *vocatio* is to let things ‘speak’ or be ‘heard’ by bringing them into nearness through the vocative power of language” (Friesen & Geissler, 2002). It is precisely the need to incorporate both meanings that Heidegger saw as he moved away from the *Vocatio* singular focus of Husserl.

I interpret *Reductio* as the basic Heideggerian / Gadamerian hermeneutic approach to incorporating oneself into a hermeneutic circle with an Other to create and enhance meaningful understanding by telling and retelling stories about any given phenomenon. In essence, *Reductio* answers the question “What is actually happening within the hermeneutic circle?” And in the same line of thought, I interpret *Vocatio* as the

product of hermeneutic engagement and the very ‘material’ with which that product is created, because *Vocatio* can create Voice (most especially from those who are silenced) literally out of the nothing-ness / everything-ness of words and the life experiences those words represent. *Vocatio* answers the question “What is the ‘substance’ that is entered and explored in this hermeneutic circle?” To explore these fundamental concepts, I engage *Reductio* (as van Manen’s *reachieving direct contact with the world*) by delving into initial contact with the Other (particularly a religious Other) bearing in mind the philosophical wisdom of phenomenological philosophers like Heidegger, Derrida, Gadamer and Levinas. Likewise, for the purpose of this dissertation, I engage *Vocatio* (as van Manen’s things *speaking*) by exploring this hermeneutic circle’s very substance called *identity*, and whether this psycho-social construct can even adequately capture the voice of religious, spiritual, and/or faith-based transformation or intensification.

Reductio: Desiring a Predictable Other

When considering religious experience, particularly acutely held religious perspectives that are likely to be common with conversion, I suspect that these experiences are accompanied by a profound sense of what is true in and beyond the world. Yet, each person must continue living in an ambiguous world long after having discovered an individual religious truth. For example, it is possible that a religious person regularly encounters other people who have not found his or her *truth*. These are religious Others who continue to nag at the sense of security found in a religious identity through their alterity. And a person’s reaction to this Other can range from eager interaction to vehement refusal. I often find myself reflecting on what will make someone predisposed to wishing to engage with or refuse the Other. In this sense, I find

myself contemplating what the Other even looks like, given the complex description of the Other embedded within Heidegger's holy, Derrida's sense of *différance*, Gadamer's Thou, and the infinite space of Levinas. To manifest this contemplation, I will use Van Manen's (2003) process of phenomenological rendering.

A Guiding Process

In seeking to make use of the profundity of phenomenological philosophy, van Manen (2003) uncovers six practical and informative activities that give a researcher the ability to observe and experience a broad and complicated phenomenon for the purpose of careful rendering. He suggests:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong and orientated pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

I describe the undertaking of each of these activities below to illuminate my research process.

My self in the world as I turn to the phenomenon. Van Manen (2003) begins the process of phenomenological research by saying: "Phenomenological research is a being-given-over to some quest" (p. 31). As introduced in Chapter One above, I need to have a commitment to the importance of the phenomenon and the sense that illuminating it is crucial, as in a quest, to creating successful and humane educational environments. In

undertaking this research, I am committing myself to the idea that *educators need to have religious literacy about the complex nature of religious experience to prepare students for the overly religious world they will someday inherit*. As an example for the need for this research, Harvard's faculty have recently embroiled themselves in a controversy by considering a new core course requirement under the category *Reason and Faith*, courses exploring the appropriate role religion and religious studies in the study of *veritas* (truth). The proposal was withdrawn before a faculty vote could take place to cool the war of words over whether Harvard *should* help its students engage in this topic. Miller (2010) suggests that this is a missed opportunity to prepare students for their future, and I agree. Miller chides the Harvard faculty for avoiding this issue:

A more brutal fight was put off for another day. But that's a pity—for Harvard, its students, and the rest of us who need leaders better informed about faith and the motivations of the faithful... To decline to grapple head-on with the role of religion in a liberal-arts education, even as debates over faith and reason rage on blogs, and as publishers churn out books defending and attacking religious belief, is at best timid and at worst self-defeating. (p. 43)

Though the faculty of Harvard perceive this quest as too dangerous to undertake, I think that failing to undertake it is *even more dangerous*. It cedes the entire conversation about religion and its role in understanding and expressing reality to people entirely outside the academy, an abdication of the role education can and should play in society. For me, this is an issue that I think is very important, and I would like to be able to illuminate the foundation of the controversy, the fluid nature of religion itself.

Living experience. By its very nature, lived experience is ephemeral and hard to grasp. To render it requires paradoxically capturing what cannot be captured, to hold what eludes holding. Van Manen (2003) suggests that only something as equally alive as

experience can capture experience, and thus, focuses on the powerful role that poetizing can play in bringing past experience into the present. He says:

As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary of a phenomenological study. To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result. The poem is the thing. So phenomenology, not unlike poetry, is a poetizing project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world. But poetizing is not “merely” a type of poetry, a making of verses. *Poetizing is thinking on original experience and is thus speaking in a more primal sense.* [emphasis added] (p. 13)

Van Manen’s quote reveals that poetizing brings “original experience” to a present state of being within words and language. Yet even this form of language exceeds common speech and everyday terms. Poetizing takes past experience and makes it alive in a more visceral, “primal” sense. Thus, to render lived experience through phenomenology *requires the use of language* that exudes the breath and life to which the experience alludes. I have begun this exploration of the phenomenon in Chapter One, and will continue to do so throughout the remaining chapters of the study.

Characteristic themes. To observe or uncover themes in the participant conversations requires a sense of what themes *are* and how they are *understood*. In Heidegger’s (1977a) *The Age of the World Picture*, he explores the understanding and thematizing that humanity has of the surrounding object world through the metaphor of experiencing a picture. He says:

Man sets himself up as the setting in which whatever is must henceforth set itself forth, must present itself [*sich...präsentieren*], i.e., be picture. Man becomes the representative [*der Repräsentant*] of that which is, in the sense of that which has the character of object. (p. 132)

In this quote, Heidegger suggests that a picture only makes sense as a term and object, because its ordering principles (i.e., the themes it conveys) are a re-presentation of humanity's own insight into what *is*. How is it that people can understand themes in the first place? Where do themes come from, if not from an internal (or internalized) sense of order and explanation? To uncover these themes, van Manen (2003) urges a close scrutiny of what he calls the "four foundational existentials" (lived body, space, time, and relation) that reflectively guide thematic construction (pp. 101-106). These four lived existentials comprise the elements of the Heideggerian world picture and lift themes to the surface of awareness. It is precisely from Heidegger's sense that humanity *thematically* sees and understands *the picture*, that van Manen subsequently suggests the four existentials are the vehicles through which humanity experiences the world. Van Manen says:

The four fundamental existentials of spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality may be seen as belonging to the existential ground by way of which all human beings experience the world, although not all in the same modality of course. (p. 102)

Together, Heidegger and van Manen indicate that as the researcher, I must orient myself with a posture of openness to those themes that I notice arising in the participant conversations, with equal attention to the fact that I, too, am in the themes as well. To test the usefulness of those themes, I also must ask myself whether the uncovered themes have truly plumbed the depths of the phenomenon. Van Manen (2003) makes use of a questioning tool to serve as a measure of whether this depth has been achieved. He says:

In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is. (p. 107)

Van Manen says that the themes must have the power to see the phenomenon as distinct from another phenomenon, to see the line or borderland between one way of being and another. This is not to say, however, that themes should reduce the phenomenon to a single essence for all time and in all places, because the phenomenon that van Manen describes above is *still highly contextualized and specific to the participants bringing it forward*. Thus, to develop themes is to: 1) view the phenomenon from within its four lived existentials, and 2) understand what makes the phenomenon *be*.

Writing and rewriting. Phenomenology makes explicit use of written text to make sense of phenomena, because it avails itself of the maxim that one must write toward understanding. So powerful is the process of writing, that the maxim is self evident. Yet if phenomenology were to *only* make use of writing, then once written, a phenomenon should be adequately explained. So why *rewrite*? The answer is found in the fact that writing is more than simply having the *researcher* gain pieces of insight into a phenomenon. Rather, it is to refine the expression of the phenomenon itself in such a way that its complexities and invisible, interlocking pieces become visible to anyone's eye, including the researcher. Van Manen (2003) describes the need for a recursive process of writing as follows:

The words are not the thing. And yet, it is to our words, language, that we must apply all our phenomenological skill and talents, because it is in and through the words that the shining through (the invisible) becomes visible. (p. 130)

To achieve van Manen's "shining through," the writing process necessitates a rewriting process, because shining *within* my mind is not shining *through*. If I am unable to express the phenomenon to someone else, I am likely missing a part of the phenomenon

where my mind fills in gaps or leaps of understanding of which I am not immediately aware. Thus, I need to be in textual dialogue with another person so that we may help each other see that which is currently invisible to us.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) illuminates the complex undertaking of making visible those phenomena that are usually invisible by addressing the roots of language. He suggests that the power of language to reveal and hide comes from the fact that language itself is rooted in phenomena *outside* the person, but intimately *with* the person. He says:

Language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests. And what we have to understand is that there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other: we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth. (p. 155)

It is precisely the paradoxical and physical nature of language that encourages a phenomenologist to interact with language itself as an entity in the engagement of phenomena. When coupled with van Manen's urge to write and rewrite, it becomes evident that the researcher and participant engage reflexively, and with each other, through a trusted, third-party friend, a kind of "person" known as language.

Maintaining pedagogical relation. By first emphasizing the primary role that writing and rewriting have in developing phenomenological methodology, van Manen (2003) subsequently connects the act of writing with the immediate and direct experience of the lived world. He suggests: "It is the minded act of writing that orients itself pedagogically to a notion that is a feature of lived experience" (p. 124). But what does it mean to be oriented pedagogically? What can be expected of me or the research I

produce through phenomenology? Van Manen (2003) says that much can be expected of me and my research:

Human science is concerned with action in that hermeneutic phenomenological reflection depends thought and therefore radicalizes thinking and the acting that flows from it... the thoughtfulness phenomenology sponsors is more likely to lead to an indignation, concern, or commitment that, if appropriate, may prompt us to turn to such political agenda. It is on the basis of understanding what serves the human good of this child, or these children in need, that one may engage in collective political action: action against political, bureaucratic, or ideological structures. Or perhaps more down to earth: one may engage in personal action which will help specific children in predicaments... Phenomenology is a philosophy of action especially in a pedagogic context. (p. 154)

Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology asks the researcher to remain ethically engaged with the participants in the way Noddings (2003) suggests that care is a necessary ingredient in pedagogy. Given that my concern for the phenomenon of conversion is rooted in my own experience and those experiences I see around me, I cannot help but remain engaged in the topic for its own sake and the impact I observe in the educational process.

Balancing the research context. Phenomenology can be a heady experience, but I also believe that any research that draws on it must convey more than platitudes. A good researcher employing hermeneutic phenomenology needs to understand the philosophical complexity of phenomenology by being fully versed in its own canon, but the researcher equally needs to be comprehensible to peers within education where practical discourse is the norm. I aspire to do both well here, and van Manen's (2003) process supports that goal:

A certain amount of openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing directions and exploring techniques, procedures and sources that are not always

foreseeable at the outset of a research project. Similarly, a philosophical treatise about the history or nature of hermeneutics or phenomenology in general may be less helpful for making a study acceptable to an external committee than a carefully initiated discussion on the phenomenology of the topic of the proposed study. (p. 162)

As van Manen suggests, my research must be open to new phenomenological possibilities and requires me to know *where* and *how* those possibilities can be uncovered. Yet, when I was discussing phenomenology, a wise friend of mine once asked of a me, “So how are you going to land that plane?” Those who know me know that I love the life of the mind and intellectual engagement, yet they also know that I enjoy being engaged in actual trainings, workshops, and classrooms with real people about real issues. Thus, I take the aforementioned philosophical approach *and* seek to undertake the philosophy in a real way.

The Process of Engagement

Based on the insights I obtained from the preliminary study I conducted in 2005, I sought out a diverse set of participants for whom religious conversion is linked to many aspects of their experience and personality to again allow for intersectional experiences to emerge. Working with “Susan,” “Maria,” and “Jing” showed me that religious conversion itself is influenced by the myriad of relationships that one’s religious identity has with other identities and cultural signifiers such as race, language, age, country of origin, educational experience, gender identity and expression, sexuality, etc. I believe that I adequately captured the diversity of religious identity movement by working with ten participants who experience(d) *overt* and *nuanced* changes in religious identity and/or times when the identity became more intensely held or diffuse over time.

Specifically, I initiated the process with primary and secondary criteria from which I would select appropriate participants. In the end, ten participants were necessary to adequately capture the diversity I sought. The initial criteria are the following:

Primary Criteria

- Three participants should identify as someone who has converted to a major world religion (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism).
- One participant should be someone who has experienced an intensification of his/her religious background (e.g. a person who originally loosely identifies as Christian, but subsequently engages the faith with new zeal or through the movement to another, more ardent, Christian faith).
- Two participants should identify as someone who has converted to a less populous religion (e.g., Paganism, Shinto, Taoism, Voudoun, Asatru, Zoroastrian, Jain, Bahai, etc.) and/or a form of atheism or agnosticism.

Secondary Criteria

- At least two participants should identify as a person of color.
- At least two participants should identify as a white person.
- At least two participants should identify as a woman.
- At least two participants should identify as a man.
- At least one participant should identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender.

Eventually, the ten participants break down into the following identity categories based on information gathered in the conversation or direct questions during the participant identification phase:⁹

- Five participants converted to a major world religion (as defined above). The other five participants either converted to a less populous religion (as defined above) or to a form of atheism/agnosticism.

⁹ Because the participants are included in each of these taxonomies, the total for all of the categories exceeds ten; i.e., a participant can be African American, male, and converted to a major world religion, etc.

- Three participants identify as having experienced an intensification of his/her religious background.
- Five participants identify as having converted to a lesser-known religion (as defined above).
- Three participants identify as having adopted an atheistic or agnostic identity.
- Five participants identify as persons of color. Five participants identify themselves as white.
- Five participants identify as men. Five participants identify as women.
- One participant identifies as transgender (male to female).
- Participants range in age from their 20s to their 60s, where at least one participant was within each “age decade.”
- Participants’ educational attainment ranges from high school graduation to near completion of a PhD program. Five participants have a high school diploma or some college experience. Two participants have obtained a bachelor’s degree. Two participants have obtained a master’s degree. One participant is working on a doctorate.
- Four participants live in the Las Vegas, NV area. The remaining six participants live in the Washington, DC metro area.

Finding conversants. To find these participants, I engaged the various professional and social networks in which I participate. Professionally, I pursued possible participants through engaging the local chapters of the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), the membership of the Social Justice Training Institute, and the various student organizations, chaplaincies, and professional staff and faculty associations at the University of Maryland. In addition, I made use of the vast diversity-related networks of Dr. Christine Clark, Founding Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, University of Nevada, Las Vegas for possible participants from another area of the country.

I also found participants through my personal networks of religious and spiritual organizations in the immediate area including: the Shambhala Center of Washington, DC, the Soka Gakkai Association's Prince George's County community center, the National Capital Pagan Leadership Conference, SpiralHeart (the mid-Atlantic Reclaiming tradition of feminist witchcraft), local Unitarian-Universalist churches, the Washington Ethical Society, and the Agape Christian Ministries. Furthermore, I made use of my broader social network through Facebook to find interested persons not directly affiliated with any group of which I am a member. Based on inquiries or recommendations, I contacted potential participants via email or phone to determine their interest, suitability, and availability relative to the above criteria. Suitable participants were given a cover letter introducing the study (see Appendix A: Cover Letter) and a consent form indicating their rights as a participant (see Appendix B: Consent Form).

Entering conversations. Once the participants were selected, each participant had a one-on-one conversation with me at a mutually agreeable time and location. Four of these participants were in Las Vegas, Nevada (and required me to make the first plane trip there for these conversations). The other six were in the Washington, DC area and were accessible by car. These conversations lasted between two and three hours to create as much room for the uncovering of personal experience. Phenomenology does not make use of a set of scripted questions, but questions generally followed the tenor of the following:

- What are some of your childhood memories related to religion?
- Tell me about some of the most significant memories regarding the religious identity of your childhood.
- What was it like for you to begin to question that identity?
- When did you first know that you were not truly practicing the religion of your childhood?

- What happened when you first identified as being a member of the new religion or no religion at all?
- How did your family or friends react?
- What are some of the facets of your current identity that you value most?
- What are some poignant remembrances for you in your process of religious conversion?
- What idea would I need to understand in order to fully grasp your religious conversion?

My conversations with these participants were punctuated with intermittent periods of reflection and writing (on their part and mine) to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon. To assist this process, I provided my participants a written journaling assignment that provided a variety of options for a reflective experience (see Appendix C: Individual Reflective Assignment). During that time, I also had all the conversations professionally transcribed. Upon receipt of the transcription, I reviewed the transcript against the audiotape for accuracy and provided each of the participants a copy of his or her respective conversation for review and approval prior to proceeding to the next round. Most of the participants found the transcripts to accurately reflect their experience. Two provided additional comments in the margins to clarify their ideas or perspectives.

Upon completion of the individual rounds of conversations, I convened two group conversations (one in Las Vegas, NV, requiring a second plane trip, and one in the Washington, DC area of approximately three hours each) to create synergy of ideas and insights that may only be brought about through having diverse participants engage with each other and me. To begin each group conversation, I made use of an experiential activity to help participants bond and engage with each other on the meaning they make with respect to their religious experiences. This activity consisted of having participants draw a “spirit map” to reflect their religious or spiritual journey to the present point in their lives (see Appendix D: Spirit Map Group Assignment and Appendix E: Participant

Spirit Maps). The intent of the spirit map exercise was to create an exercise that allowed the participants to explore their own stories through a medium that did not insist on a linear mode of storytelling to convey those experiences. It also had the added benefit of providing a vehicle through which participants could readily engage with one another in details of their conversion and intensification narratives. As before, these transcripts were professionally transcribed, reviewed by me, and then sent out to participants for review and approval. All participants found the transcripts to be accurate and reflective of their experience. And having completed this process, I then began the process of rendering themes, uncovered from the voices of my participants, within these various texts.

Looking Forward to the Uncovering of Being

In considering and reflecting on the many phenomenological conversations I had, I recall the basic purpose of undertaking this study is to develop a heightened sense of awareness around religious identity and the nuanced experiences people have around it. Van Manen and Levering (2003) understand these experiences to be the ground for developing “critical pedagogical competence: knowing how to act tactfully in pedagogic situations on the basis of a carefully edified thoughtfulness.” (p. 8) What did I find as I entered conversation with my participants? Which stories lifted crucial themes of religious conversion forward? And how are they and I made richer for the experience?

Through each story, I found the richness of their Being, filled with complexity and, perhaps, contradiction. Shakespeare (1960) neatly and poetically captures this precious, and often paradoxical, state of Being through the character of Oliver in *As You Like It*. When asked about the mysteriousness of his identity, Oliver says:

‘Twas I. But ‘tis not I! I do not shame
To tell you what I was, since my conversion

So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am.
(Act IV, Scene iii, Lines 142-144, p. 85)

As in the character of Oliver, I am searching for the myriad of possibilities that are present in the religious or spiritual experiences of my participants. In these moments, I create room for the telling of their unique stories of conversion. And in reflection with them, we savor their stories that “so sweetly taste.” It is precisely in the subsequent Chapter 4 where I explore their stories and provide a metaphoric vehicle of the heroic journey as lens through which their stories can be seen and understood.

CHAPTER 4

FOLLOWING THE HEROIC JOURNEY: WALKING THE PATH TO A NEW IDENTITY

Like savoring a strong tea, I am steeped in the stories of my participants. Having engaged in individual and group conversations that brought forth personal experiences of joy, pain, relationships, and a sense of satisfying unfinishedness, I find myself retrospectively noticing patterns in the details, much the way Rilke (2005) notices the unmistakable patterns of his own life. Like Rilke, I am reminded that noticing the pattern is only the first step in understanding. After seeing the pattern, I must delve into it with full openness and trust in the process I have set before myself. Rilke is my example when he says, “I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world. I may not complete this last one but I give myself to it” (p. 45). Thus, I give myself over to the patterns I perceive in the lives of my participants. In hearing the various stories of triumph over adversity and the deep satisfaction of hard work that brings forth fruit, I am reminded of Campbell and Moyers’ (1988) description of the hero’s (and/or heroine’s) journey. They say:

Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world. (p. 123)

I begin with this quote, because it captures the elements of surprise and wonder that arise within my participants’ meandering stories journeying, but it does so by emphasizing the journey they undergo. In thinking of a hero/ine’s journey, I mean to explore the lives of

ordinary people who do ordinary things and bring back something utterly life changing in the process. This heroic adventure implies an *a priori* possibility that the traveler is not necessarily superhuman, but answers a call to nevertheless do something that appears difficult or impossible. Campbell and Moyers describe this ordinary heroism: “The more challenging or threatening the situation or context to be assimilated and affirmed, the greater the stature of the person who can achieve it” (p. 161).

Yet to achieve this stature begs deeper questions. Is religious conversion an experience that involves being lost? What does it mean to be found? Who or what is doing the finding? Does a journey of this sort require that the hero/ine leave something behind? The insights my participants gain are not necessarily new on the scale of human history, but add to collective human wisdom, while also continuing to propel their individual spiritual lives forward into a vast unknown that calls them—a deep human need on the scale or scope of hunger or sexuality. In their own ways, each of my participants is a hero/ine who has brought forth a kernel of truth from their conversion experience. I am grateful to them for their candor, speculative curiosity, and even chagrin at the less pleasant aspects of their stories. One truth certainly binds them together from the beginning. None of them have returned from this religious journey without significant changes in their sense of self (cumulatively brought forward throughout their lives) and the relationships they have cultivated along the way.

Heroism: A Journey Imbued with Purpose

There is no bright line to distinguish necessarily the mythological tales of heroes and heroines from those of gods and goddesses. In fact, many stories of myth recount movement across the human/divine barrier as a recurring theme, leaving an ambiguous

messiness where we might prefer simple binary logic and neatly ordered taxonomies. Instead, mythological heroism involves the feat or journey that makes a person (or god/dess) better than they once were, a sacrifice of self for a greater good, or a restoration of a cosmic order. In each of these myth archetypes, the common denominator is a search for purpose, truth, or meaning that yields something of significance, where thereafter life is no longer the same. In what follows, I explore how a mythological heroic journey and the phenomenon of religious conversion closely mirror each other in content and form and, subsequently, introduce the participants of my study.

The Search for Religious Identity as Heroic

When considering a conversion narrative, I am taken by the overall sense that possibilities are being expanded and that limits are being tested and/or crossed. Such a push is not driven by idle curiosity, but a deeper sense or need for fulfillment in one's life. In weaving myth and phenomenology together, I seek to take advantage of their mutually reinforcing power to uncover and illustrate the search for meaning and purpose as a primal need that propels humans in a search for something, perhaps God or another expression of ultimacy (such as a physicist's quest for a theoretical formula of everything). With myth and phenomenology taken together (which I coin *phenomythology*) I can give what might appear to be an everyday personal event larger significance and deeper inward meaning.

Yet phenomythology is not the apotheosis of my ten participants, or even a singling out of their experience as superior or noteworthy, in contrast to the experiences of others. Rather, they are examples of a particular search for meaning that is unusual against the norm. Like all quests for deep truth, they asymptotically approach the liminal

question of the divine with a blend of *Eros*, the attraction of God, and *Thanatos*, the fear or awe of God.¹⁰ This phenomythological rendering attempts to describe the dynamic tensions between striving to connect with a transcendent unity and the fear or skepticism of what one might actually find there, reaching for that limit and not quite pushing completely through. To illustrate by example a typical heroic journey and how phenomenology renders it, I turn to the Sumerian story of Inanna (also known as Ishtar) as translated by Wolkstein and Kramer (1983).

Inanna's decision. Inanna's larger story contains within it certain small stories that illustrate specific phases of a heroic journey that one might undertake, though I do not imply that all heroic journeys contain each of these phases or require a particular sequence to be valid. Many stories begin with the hero/ine recognizing that something is amiss in the world that needs attending. Inanna's story of descent starts after she, in a fit or rage for Gilgamesh rejecting her sexual advances, sends the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh. When Inanna learns that Gilgamesh and Enkidu have killed the Bull of Heaven, she knows that it is her duty as the high priestess of heaven, and her obligation as the one who set the Bull's death in motion, to attend the funeral in the underworld. When asked why she has come to the gates of the underworld, Inanna replies:

Because of my older sister, Ereshkigal, Her husband,
Gulgalanna, the Bull of Heaven, has died. I have come to
witness the funeral rites. Let the beer of his funeral rites be
poured into the cup. Let it be done. (p. 55)

¹⁰ Liminal bifurcation of the quest for ultimacy or transcendence derived from a lecture by Dr. Peter Antoci in a class on religious metaphor in the Department of English at the University of Maryland, September 7, 2010. (ENGL 278M)

Phenomenological interest in this initial decision scrutinizes the bodily impulse to move and the inner existential motivations to place oneself on a journey where the end point is unknown. What compels the journey in the first place? What incentives or disincentives play into a decision to start a heroic journey? My participants experienced various forms of motivation, where some were quite extreme.

Inanna's descent. Inanna arrives at the gates to the underworld dressed in her power.¹¹ Yet to enter the underworld, she must prove herself worthy to enter this sacred place by leaving her *me* behind, ultimately arriving naked, powerless, and humbled before her sister.¹² Ereshkigal details this process:

Heed my words: Bolt the seven gates of the underworld.
Then, one by one, open each gate a crack. Let Inanna enter.
As she enters, remove her royal garments. Let the holy
priestess of heaven enter bowed low. (p. 57)

Passing through these gates is an example of the various trials or challenges heroes must undertake to complete their journey to prove their readiness and capacity for the arduous nature of this journey. Though not specifically an experience of the divine per se, these trials invariably appear in one form or another with my participants. Where are the boundaries between the Being of my participants and that which is not truly them? I believe these trials begin to answer the confounding questions found in the Huna's Flower Prayer: "Who is this flower before me? What is the work of this god? I would

¹¹ In Sumerian mythology, power, and its responsible exercise in the world, is physically manifested in various items imbued with, and called, *me* (pronounced *may*). The word *me* is derived from the Sumerian word for "to be."

¹² Ancient Christian baptism rites also required the person to be baptized to be stripped naked, submerged, and then clothed in a new white cloth.

know myself in all my parts.”¹³ A phenomenological rendering of these real-life trials involves uncovering which parts of Being are brought forward into the journey and which are left behind. Which interactions of *Dasein*’s world determine suitability to encounter the divine? Can Being be parsed out between that which is worthy and that which is not? Do these trials bring a person close to a transcendent limit that would be unachievable otherwise?

Inanna’s death and resurrection. When Inanna finally arrives at the underworld and greets her sister, she encounters the divine, but it is not what she expects. For Inanna, her ascension to the divine first involves a mortal death. The story continues:

Ereshkigal rose from her throne. Inanna started toward the throne. The Annuna, the judges of the underworld, surrounded her. They passed judgment against her. Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death. She spoke against her the word of wrath. She uttered against her the cry of guilt. She struck her. Inanna was turned into a corpse, A piece of rotting meat, And was hung from a hook on the wall. (p. 60)

As mentioned prior, the approach to God is marked with aspects of shadow (*thanatos*) and light (*eros*). Prior to her descent to the underworld, Inanna led a charmed mortal life where every desire she had was fulfilled, especially her long and erotic engagement with her husband, Dumuzi. It only stands to reason that a full engagement with the divine would require that she undergo something vastly different, a conversion from one life to another.

After three days of death, she is resurrected by the life forces of plants and water, whereupon she ascends to being a goddess. Such direct encounters with the divine open

¹³ In the Hawaiian Huna tradition (and in the Feri pagan tradition which borrows heavily from it), the Flower or *Ha* prayer is a mantra of self-discovery and alignment.

many phenomenological questions about the experience. Given the magnitude of the encounter, can it be described in words at all? How are the phenomenological existentials of time, body, and place perceived in those moments? And what are the effects on her relationships to everything that existed in her life prior to her apotheosis? The question of relationship is addressed in her return to the world above.

Inanna's return. The climax of Inanna's story occurs when she is in the underworld, but the price of her encounter is truly seen when she attempts to return to the world she knew as it was. No one has ever left the underworld, and that was a law that even she could not break. Thus, in her ascent, the *galla* (demonic enforcers of underworld law) insisted that she could leave only when she decreed who would stay in her place. Her story contains the bittersweet reality of seeing and achieving her status as a goddess, but that she must also give up something just as precious to the divine. Inanna allows the *galla* to take Dumuzi in her place and must forever live with the sorrow of that decision. Inanna's choice is recounted:

In Uruk, by the big apple tree, Dumuzi, the husband of Inanna, was dressed in his shining *me*-garments. He sat on his magnificent throne; he did not move... Inanna fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death. She spoke against him the word of wrath. She uttered against him the cry of guilt: "Take him! Take Dumuzi away!" The *galla*, who know no food, who know no drink, Who eat no offerings, who drink no libations, Who accept no gifts, seized Dumuzi. They made him stand up; they made him sit down. They beat the husband of Inanna. They gashed him with axes. (p. 71)

Inanna made a choice and, thus, had to pay the price for the divine knowledge she obtained. The phenomenological questions from this ongoing phase imply a sense that the world becomes stable again, but that it is irreversibly changed. How can a real person live in an imperfect world with divine knowledge? Are there limits or boundaries that

should never be crossed, even in the name of religion? What is the true price to a person's relationships when she or he experiences a religious conversion?

In considering a phenomymthology of Inanna, I recount her story to paint a potentially larger picture of what religious conversion can look like and how it is experienced. Certainly, not all of my participants engage in every aspect of this heroic story or other stories like it. But they do experience many of these rites of passage as a part of their conversion narratives. For example, every decision that my participants bring forward appears to have ramifications beyond themselves. Each engages in this journey to make sense of their individual Being and how it relates to the surrounding world. Each strives to bring something of value back to their "ordinary" lives. Thus, explicit use of a heroic journey metaphor (like that of Inanna) is not meant to be a motif in which I will force fit the narratives of my participants. The opposite is true. Upon hearing their stories, the elements of a heroic journey become obvious in phenomenological and dialogic engagement as I answer the main question of this study: What is the lived experience of religious conversion?

Meeting Those Who Experience the Phenomenon

When engaging with my participants, I informed them that I desired active participation from them in the analysis of the phenomenon of religious conversion. I hoped to dispel any notion that they should defer to my judgment by overtly calling them my "co-researchers." By virtue of their status as co-researchers, each brought significant experiential knowledge to this study, the likes of which I could get from no one else. This approach appears to have worked, because they eagerly engaged me, and each other, with their stories by observing similarities and, occasionally, stark differences.

Some of the participants chose to use their first names (knowing I would always omit their last names). Others chose pseudonyms or rarely-used middle names to occlude their identity. **Art** is a social worker that I met through a colleague. Originally from South Africa, he identifies as black (and in the US, he would likely be perceived as white) and has worked in social work for the past ten years (after a mid-life career change). His story involves several religious transitions among various Christian sects and esoteric quasi-religious practices related to subtle energy manipulation. He is clear, however, that he is not “new age.” **Ben** is a white undergraduate at the University of Maryland whom I met through an inquiry with a student organization in which he participated whose mission is to inform the campus community about atheism and people who subscribe to that identity. Having come from Catholic roots, he now identifies with the term atheist and is exploring nuances derived from that term. **Henrike** (pronounced: hen ree kuh) is a white graduate student at the University of Maryland who originally hails from Germany whom I met through a conference for graduate teaching assistants. She brings a very interesting perspective as someone who is familiar with the more secular nature of Christianity in Europe and the way Christianity was practiced, for example, in her study-abroad foster home in North Carolina. Though very interested in spirituality as a topic (and with an increasing desire to learn about Buddhism), Henrike most often identifies as agnostic. **Juanita** is an openly post-operative transgender (male to female) person who sees her religious journey as intimately connected to her gender and sexuality. Born in Hawaii (and of mixed-race descent), Juanita was excommunicated from the Catholic church and eventually finds herself practicing Nichiren Buddhism for more than 40 years. **Karen** is a white woman I met while at a National Association for

Multicultural Education (NAME) conference who has a circuitous story of leaving Judaism for Buddhism, who later reclaimed Judaism as complementary to her Buddhist practice. Her story includes a sense of intensity in her religious search as she even opted to obtain a masters degree in religious studies from Naropa University. **Mary** is a white woman and a former graduate from, and police officer of, the University of Maryland whom I met conducting trainings for the office in which I work. She strongly identifies as having an evangelical Christian background, but has also incorporated significant amounts of Jewish practice into her life (though has not technically converted to preserve her marriage). Nevertheless, she considers herself as someone who has converted religiously several times. **Junior** is an African-American man who works as a state legislator. He grew up in a Pentecostal home, but has participated actively in other faiths including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Nichiren Buddhism, and now practices Baptist Christianity. He says that his current practice continues to incorporate much of what he experienced in the past. **Mujahid** is an African-American man who converted from Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) roots to his current religion, Islam. He is very involved in his community's interfaith dialogue organization and attributes much of his religious transformation to his experiences in the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. **Theresa** is an African-American self-described "evangelist" who received her calling in the *Jesus is Lord* non-denominational Christian church, a local church in Maryland. I met Theresa through a mutual friend who knew Theresa through her job. Theresa grew up in the Baptist church (where her father was the minister), but also experienced serious and significant personal trauma that thrust her out of the church (and Christianity) for a period of time. Her return to Christianity brings with it a lengthy

period of study and interest in immanent and metaphysical understandings of the Divine.

Wolf is a white, ex-Catholic who now practices the Wiccan religion and identifies himself as a “witch.” I met Wolf through a call for participants in the local Reclaiming pagan community (called SpiralHeart). He is very open about his religious practice, but has also become more selective about what he chooses to communicate to non-pagans due to an uncomfortably long period of unemployment.

These ten individuals have each undergone a process of change that has been marked with moments of triumph and/or tragedy. Indeed, Mujahid suggests that religious conversion appears frightening from the beginning, and uses a metaphor to illustrate his point. He says: “What a caterpillar calls death, everyone else calls a butterfly” (Mujahid). His metaphor is apt, because it captures several qualities in the transformation. Their heroic journeys are not over, but continue to this day as they seek new levels of understanding and deeper commitments of practice. And like the butterfly, they bring the wisdom and experience of the caterpillar forward into their new existence. But what is actually taking place? Are there certain catalytic moments that characterize genuine religious conversion? What is happening around this person, especially in existing relationships? What does it mean to engage in a hero/ine’s journey toward a new religious sensibility?

The Sense of Something Greater

The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there’s something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his [sic] society. This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It’s usually a cycle, a going and a returning.
(J. Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 123)

The gist of my participants' stories is that they have undertaken a journey, moving between physical and metaphoric religious spaces. But these changes in place imply deeper changes of Being that manifest as new expressions of character, perspective, identity, insight and purpose. What are these initial places in which my participants begin their journeys? What propels or compels them to move from one place to another, and from one identity to another? How do they overcome the overwhelming social inertia to remain in the fold of family and community expectations? Anton (2001) suggests that in order to understand the fullness of the journey *and* the pilgrim, having a firm understanding of the point of initiation is crucial. For Anton, this point of departure is the general milieu of society constructed as a web of norms, behaviors, and parameters to which all people are meant to conform. Citing the work of Burke (1966), Anton describes this starting place as follows:

Children are born into communities that issue a flurry of negativity. This negativity is present in acts of physical resistance, and just as importantly, it takes form in the "tribal thou shalt nots." We, as children, are surrounded by and inundated with numerous "horatory don'ts," and thus, the intentional threads by which we inhere in the world are thereby ratified and sanctified by societal impositions. (pp. 57-58)

In considering Anton's description of our collective birth circumstance, I think that his description is generally apt, but it leaves scant room for individual movement. Though his words imply a kind of totality from which there is no escape, I think that all people deviate from norms at least a little. Despite these "societal impositions," people end up finding some kind of individuality, likely not stepping beyond a boundary where serious sanction is brought to bear.

But staying safely within the approved boundaries is not something my participants have done. They have joined the vanguard of people who chose to exercise religion differently from the way they grew up. They defy what is expected of them in the pursuit of something that feels more true and compelling. Thus, their stories begin interacting with a call to something different. This call comes in many different forms, but for each there is a turning point to pursue the promise of that call. What is this call and who or what is calling? What force can propel someone to leave the safety of home and community to go forth on an adventure? Heidegger (1962) elaborates on the way that *Dasein* experiences a worlding call that illuminates a possible reason religious conversion appears so different from person to person when answering the previous questions. He says:

The call points *forward* to *Dasein*'s potentiality-for-Being, and it does this as a call which comes *from* uncanniness. The caller is, to be sure, indefinite; but the "whence" from which it calls does not remain a matter of indifference for the calling. This "whence"—the uncanniness of thrown individualization—gets called too [mitgerufen] in the calling; that is, it too gets disclosed [miterschlossen]. In calling forth to something, the "whence" of the calling is the "whither" to which we are called back. When the call gives us a potentiality-for-Being to understand, it does not give us one which is ideal and universal; it discloses it as that which has been currently individualized and which belongs to that particular *Dasein*. (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 325-326)

I am especially taken by Heidegger's connections between uncanniness (with all of its accompanying sense of anxiety) and the idea that *Dasein*'s future Being depends on that anxiety to move forward into self-discovery, where even anxiety and discomfort become a part of the future self (an incorporation of past experience into future self-awareness). Correspondingly, it then makes sense that a *Dasein*'s sense of future-self will necessarily

be dependent on those particular, individual experiences unique to that *Dasein* within her/his world and in collaboration with that world of Being. What is the uncanniness that my participants have experienced to propel them into the unknown? Though their experiences are unique to each one, are there poetic patterns in stories of their starting points? Indeed, every hero/ine starts somewhere.

Inertia and Impatience

As mentioned above, a common point of entry among my participants is a sense that they existed in a time and place where their lives were planned and laid out before them. Decisions were made, even prior to their birth, which formed the boundaries of what was possible. And this world had a gravity that ceaselessly kept them in place, making movement beyond the boundary difficult and altogether unlikely. But what makes this curtailing circumstance possible? What fuels it? What makes a person's point of origin so "sticky" that it adheres to the consciousness? My participants describe their origin points with language that indicates how Anton's "threads" of "inherence" are spun by a deep sense of inertia, the sluggish physical force that keeps a body at rest. Like inertia's effect on the body, this social gravity pulls people back to the center where relationships enforce norms and circumscribe desires.

Boredom. Without question, a sense of monotonous fatigue and boredom permeates many of the stories of my participants. Several describe their youthful religious experiences in very matter-of-fact language that indicates a sense of childhood resignation to one's fate. Ben, Henrike, Karen, and Wolf each describe some of their religious experiences in their youth as follows:

After going to a public school, I started going to Sunday school at church or in church. I was in a Catholic church

again. It's funny. So I found that exceedingly boring.
(Ben)

It [religious instruction] was very boring. I mean, it wasn't an engagement. It was more like, "Okay, you have to learn," for instance, "Psalm 23. You have to be able to memorize it." So it was more of that. (Henrike)

But Hebrew school, which was Sunday school, I found it boring. It didn't resonate with me. I didn't feel like it was giving me anything. (Karen)

I remember going to church and being bored. (Wolf)

But what exactly *is* boredom? How does something so passive exert such an active, neutralizing force? What compels someone to work against it? Boredom is etymologically connected to the French use of the word bore, "connoting dullness or lack of interest." But it is also connected to an "annoying" or "tiresome thing" when someone is acting as a "hoax." In this way, falseness and weariness are woven together. Therein, it appears, lies the power of boredom to squelch effort and to simultaneously encourage the resistance against it. Ben, Karen, and Wolf indicate their boredom at the center of their childhood or youth experiences with religion (and its corresponding effects to keep them in place), but also cite this boredom as one of the very reasons they had a deeper sense of yearning for something different that sparked curiosity and connection to their lived experiences. They knew that they were experiencing a profound falseness, but could not initially name it as such.

Expectations. Wolf provides insight into the way he behaves when in his bored state by closely articulating this paradox of torpor and the necessity to live up to the expectations set before him. He explains his religious journey through his spirit map

exercise and introduces us to his past by suggesting that he was ambulatory, but completely unaware and asleep. Wolf says:

Then I went to college, which is, you know, the magic kingdom. The army. Work. Marriage. Work. And this is me sleepwalking. You know all the way through that.
(Wolf)

Wolf's description of his childhood and early adulthood is indicative of the early conditions that make a heroic journey *necessary*. He is literally alive and not alive at the same time. He uses the word "sleepwalking," but only makes use of its ambulatory nature to convey that his body was undertaking the daily tasks set before him *and* that his mind and soul were dormant and starved.

Art also describes expectations that he faced, even as a very young child, in starkly familiar terms: guilt and parental pressure. Despite not being Catholic, he attended a Catholic school and regularly heard about the concept of the soul and its defilement. Art recounts:

So even though I wasn't Catholic it [hearing about how his soul was being stained] kind of freaked me out a bit and said to myself, "You better behave yourself," and even when I – before becoming Catholic I used to carry around a guilt complex coming to church school on a Monday because the first question that would have been asked was who missed Mass on Sunday [Chuckling.] And then my youngest brother wanted to become Catholic... He was three years behind me and my father said, "Look, if your brother is gonna become Catholic you might as well all become Catholic." (Art)

From these beginnings, Wolf and Art embody the conundrum all persons must consider when seeking personal meaning in one's life. Anton (2001) articulates this problem by suggesting that a person's social personhood is actually created by and for others (and can exist independent of the person in question). He says:

I arrive in the world already social; I “am someone” long before I have been “socialized” into my community’s world. That is, I exist “for others” before I exist “for myself.” I might have been planned and even named before my conception. (Anton, 2001, p. 65)

Anton’s description of our social personae is actually a definition of the world around which *Dasein* exists and interacts. Society’s expectations on *Dasein* become reified in a set of norms and hopes that constellate around *Dasein*, but ignore the very real possibility that *Dasein*’s internal reality may differ. It is precisely at this juncture of *Dasein*’s interaction with the world where boredom and expectation can create a metaphoric and psychological opening, a crack that indicates another world is possible where social expectation mirrors one’s own desire and goals.

Freedom now. From these places that devalue or ignore the interior life of *Dasein*, my participants yearn for a place that reflects who they are. They become impatient for freedom, and that impatience is what eventually moves them to overcome social inertia. The movement is internal, but the spiritual journey is mirrored as physical movement where the hero/ine physically leaves one place, being called to another place. Karen, Mary, and Mujahid each describe the struggle to acquire freedom from the expectations that previously burdened them. Though Karen’s description is much more assertive about the positive aspects of freedom, Mary and Mujahid also note that there is a mixed feeling that comes with the aspiration of freedom, because it involves separating themselves from people in their lives. They recount:

It feels freeing, liberating. You don’t have to look a certain way. You don’t have to dress a certain way. You don’t have to be interested in certain things. There’s just much more space to really be who you are. It’s almost like you have permission to be who you are. (Karen)

I found [being an atheist] to be freeing. I thought now I can be – if there is no god, I can choose my own path. So I can be the person that I want to be, whoever that person is, and I saw that as a positive thing. The only negative was in I realized that it would hurt my parents. (Mary)

Well, there's a quote that comes to mind by a black mystic, Dr. Howard Thurman... His prayer was – it was a quote, but a prayer. He said, "Oh God, bless me to be free and endure the burdens of freedom and the aloneness of those without chains." And I found myself... drawing on that a great deal, because sometimes I'll see the group in the chains, and we all have a tendency to wanna be a part of, but, no, not at the price of putting the chains on, I won't. I just won't do it. (Mujahid)

Heidegger (1993a) understands that the freedom for which my participants crave is rooted in a desire to dwell and be supported in their dwelling. Karen literally needed to dwell in another environment (moving to Boulder, Colorado) to firmly establish her religious conversion. Mary and Mujahid needed to construct a psychic dwelling for their new identities. Yet each needed a safe place to Be. Of this need to dwell, Heidegger says:

To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace with the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing.* It pervades dwelling in its whole range. That range reveals itself to us as soon as we recall that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth. [emphasis in original] (Heidegger, 1993a, p. 351)

Heidegger's quote suggests that religious conversion springs from a desire to be free, but that the ache for freedom implies an *a priori* lack of safety among people where one should feel safe. Though their families and communities intended to create a safe dwelling, the impact is that they did the opposite. Where can a person with no dwelling turn? From whom can a potential religious convert seek guidance when everyone else

unknowingly reifies the social expectations described by Anton? Can one be guided through the religious conversion process?

Those who guide. With the exception of one, all of my participants spoke passionately and at length about a person who helped them see beyond the web of expectations in which they found themselves. Their individual journeys were made easier, indeed possible, with the help of mentors who helped guide them to a new, and often hidden, path. It is not unusual for heroic journeys to feature a guide who gives advice, points out a path, or even chastises foolish decisions. For example, Prometheus serves as a mentor to all mankind by bringing fire from which civilization can spring. Chiron, the wounded centaur healer, advises Hercules in his quests. Even Inanna has her elder brother, Utu the sun god, coaching her to select Dumuzi as her husband. The part that stands out for me, of course, is the willingness to be guided at all. Van de Wetering (1984) gives language to my initial surprise when he notes that a spiritual search can often be at odds with our western cultures. Van de Wetering says:

To submit to a master is a difficult concept, especially in America. To bow to another? Most of the Americans I know are intellectual Cool Hand Lukes, and as a free Dutchman I sympathize. We got where we are by initiative, by free will, or so we like to think... Just how free are we? Are there as many choices as we would love to believe? (p. 26)

Yet despite this cultural mismatch, my participants indicate that particular people acted as guides at crucial moments along their way. For some, this guide was a self-described spiritual leader, while for others, this person was an adult (often a teacher) who took the time to give insight and personal attention to their mentee's needs. Art, Henrike, Juanita,

and Junior serve as examples of where they found guidance and what their guides did for them:

I can't remember exactly how he phrased himself but the bottom line is it did come down to some point where he was talking about – and you could use this energy to heal anybody anywhere and I can't remember exactly but he may have said something to the effect that I didn't appear to be put off by what he was saying and no, I wasn't listening and I was kind of engaging sincerely and that I didn't scoff at it. (Art)

And I had the same religion teacher throughout. So his perception would be kind of the – or his instruction – was probably pretty lasting. And he was – although people that teach religion, then, are church approved, his approach was very critical. (Henrike)

My third grade instructor... was the one that released to me the idea that the Catholic church was not perceived the way I was raised. It's an institution. The idea of God and spirituality is not necessarily that building, that institution, and early on I recognized that that was true and, as I prayed I remember making my prayers to God even though I was in our Lady of Peace cathedral or something like that. (Juanita)

He was an older, he was an older gentleman, he was one of the ministers of our church, and he was, he's like the dad that I don't have today. And I have been going through things through life that I would go and talk to him. And as a Baptist minister, he's hardcore, pretty much, that he, but he could give me guidance and we could talk about things. And I think he would be, would have been a great example of that, that I can talk to him about anything along those lines. [And he was open to me] because he, I think because of his age of maturity and life, and then at the same token, he was a minister all his life. (Junior)

Clearly, a guide is an essential ingredient in their stories, but what made it possible to overcome their culturally imbued individualism? Lingis (2004b) lends insight into why

this relationship develops in the first place. Simply, my participants trust these guides because they have no other option than to trust. Lingis elaborates:

And when someone there is standing before us, speaking directly to us, we have been cautioned that he is not speaking with his own voice but speaking the language of his gender, his family, his class, his education, his culture, his economic and political interests, his unconscious drives, indeed his state of physical health and alertness... *When we leave our home and community to dwell awhile in some remote place, it happens every day that we trust a stranger, someone with whom we have no kinship bonds, no common loyalty to a community or creed, no contractual obligations. We have no idea what he said, what are his family, clan, and village coordinates, the categories with which he represents for himself society, nature, and the cosmos. We attach to someone whose words or whose movements we do not understand, whose reasons or motives we do not see. Our trust short-circuits across the space where we represent socially defined behaviors and makes contact with the real individual agent there—with you.* [first emphasis added] (pp. viii-ix)

Lingis indicates that trusting oneself to a guide means that one is no longer at home.

Rather, “we dwell awhile in a remote place.” What is this remote place that precedes an intentional search? Is it akin to purgatory, limbo, or a desert? It does not appear to be a place of our own making. Rather, this lost place is something that the guide navigates and knows well. Is it an indication that a guide is someone who was once lost and knows how to escape a lost place? Lingis echoes Heidegger’s previous assertion that a new religious identity requires a place in which to dwell *safely*. It is precisely the absence of that dwelling that creates the urge to trust a perfect stranger to lead a journey without a clear end point.

Trials: Be-ing Ready

When considering the phenomenon of religious conversion, the experiences of my participants indicate that there is a very involved prior process to the actual attainment of a new religious identity. Having lived through moments of *unheimlich*, displacement, and finding someone who can point them in another direction, they begin to embody what the etymology of the word *convert* indicates (literally meaning “with a turn”). They must first turn away from what they have known to enter an ambiguous, in-between, and often temporary place from which they can truly start their journey. Yet their movement to a new identity is not automatic or quickly attained. Like many heroic stories, my participants also experience numerous trials or challenges to make sure they are ready to accept a new identity, or said another way, to be the hero/ine of their own story. To follow the various trials of my participants, I metaphorically make use of the story of the Mayan Hero Twins because of the rich variety of trials the story contains. This myth allows for the rich differences that my participants indicate among each other’s stories, where some go through several of these Mayan “houses.” Willis (1993) recounts this myth of the Mayan Twins as follows:

The twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque were invited to play against the gods, in their own infernal realms. By magic they passed safely through the House of Knives and lit fires to survive the House of Cold. In the House of Jaguars, they tamed the animals by feeding them bones rather than themselves, and then went on to survive the House of Fire. In the House of Bats, Hunahpu was decapitated by one of the creatures. Charming the animals, Xbalanque convinced the turtle to pose as the head of his twin. (p. 249)

My participants do not necessarily enter each Mayan house in their individual journeys, but there is a common theme in each of these trials across my participants’ movement to

a new religious identity. Each of them indicates a time when they were in a temporary place (perhaps accompanied by a temporary identity) that challenges them to truly consider what they want in terms of a lifelong religious experience. What are these temporary places and what function do they hold in the larger narrative? How do my participants think about these temporary places, while in the moment and in retrospect? Are these various trials interchangeable? Truly, do these trials ever stop?

Casey (1993) provides insight into the purpose these trials (phenomorphologically portrayed here as the Mayan houses) through his elaboration on the purpose of “way stations.” He says, “I accomplish the redoubled tracking by traversing various particular way stations on my journey. These way stations serve as condensed reminders and retainers of my journey’s placio-temporality” (p. 279). In this quote, Casey indicates that these way stations of religious conversion are necessary ingredients in the final choice of religion, because they remind the convert of what has been tried (related to the word trial) and whether that attempt succeeded or failed. Metaphorically, these houses operate as a place where a religious convert can try something new to see how compatible the new religious identity is with the past and present life experiences the potential convert brings forward into the new identity. Regardless of the outcome, my participants did not stay in a trial phase. Rather, the trials indicated the rightness or wrongness of where they went next or what they left behind. Below, I lift up some of the trials of my participants as the Mayan Hero Twins experienced them for insight into the meaning of these temporary way stations.

The house of knives: Being targeted. Though it seems like it would be common and ordinary, I suspect that overt hostility is always received as a shock on some level.

Ben and Karen provide excellent examples of what it means to experience blatant hostility in their religious identity movements. Ben's story is complicated in that he is still developing a much more nuanced identity than the word *atheist* indicates (toying with more esoteric terms like "agnostic" or "humanist"), but he nevertheless participates in the University of Maryland student organization for atheists. Ben recalls a common experience of hostility usually from some self-identified Christian students:

A lot of people who talk to us when we are tabling are very friendly. I think the people who maybe have mean things to say either don't come to the table or they'll just (we call it "sniping"). They'll just be like, "Oh, Jesus loves you." And then just like walk away. (Ben)

Ben's quote is particularly intriguing, because he provides a very disturbing and violent military metaphor to convey the meaning of how this hostility impacts him. He indicates that "We [members of his student organization] call it 'sniping.'" For Ben, his trial in the House of Knives is not one of open warfare, but of stealthy enemies who attack from the shadows with invective and withdraw just as quickly. His trial is about the initial offense, but also the fact that he has no recourse to respond to it, because his assailant has already disappeared. The trial is also compounded by the fact that the attack comes with an ironic message that Jesus loves him. If the message to Ben and his friends were that Jesus really loved them, would it not make sense that the messenger stay to engage the message further in good faith? What is it like to receive a stealthy, hidden attack in the House of Knives veiled with words of love? What is the impact?

Karen's story of being targeted is somewhat different. Though Karen often felt disconnected from Judaism or Jewish people around her, she retained the moniker of

being Jewish. Even though the identity was loosely held, attacks to that identity continued to affect her as the following example indicates:

I was at a party and someone – I don't even know how it got brought up that I was Jewish. And some guy that I didn't know, he said, "Jews killed Jesus." And I didn't even know what he was talking about. And I'm like, "Oh, I don't know what to tell you, man." And I just found him really annoying and I just stayed away from him. (Karen)

Unlike Ben's experience in his trial, Karen's attack was open, bold, and blunt. She downplays the emotional impact of this verbal exchange, but her actions indicate something further. In this party, a space where people should feel free to mingle and move about, she yielded space and her freedom of movement to this guy when he hurled three words at her, "Jews killed Jesus." For Karen, the House of Knives is about an experience of being targeted with a slur that is not socio-politically neutral or inoffensive. This slur has been used in Christian history to justify pogroms against Jews for centuries. Thus, it is not surprising that Karen reacted the way many Jews did during pogroms, by hiding themselves away and quietly restricting their own movement.

Ben and Karen's experiences with this form of trial indicate that the House of Knives is likely rooted in an experience of being seen as an Other, outside the mainstream. Is the House of Knives less likely to be a trial for someone in the United States converting *to* Christianity? Given that atheist or Jewish identities are socially seen in reference to Christian dominance, they can be understood as identities and people who exist in Anzaldúa's (1987) borderlands. As such, Ben and Karen are targeted as borderland persons in their trials of religious conversion. Perhaps they share something in common with Anzaldúa's description of what women, particularly women of color, feel in a patriarchal, white culture. Anzaldúa says:

The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. (p. 20)

Anzaldúa's quote contains within it many of the features recounted by Ben and Karen. Ben tables at the University of Maryland student fair, because he knows that atheists often live isolated from each other in "separate cells." Karen knows that she must keep a semblance of public composure when attacked, just like "drinking shock with [her] morning coffee." And both Ben and Karen know that they are not safe when they are hunted "as prey" by adversaries who are hidden and seen. Indeed, for some religious converts, the House of Knives is an experience of the borderland they inhabit.

The house of cold: Disconnection and depression. If the House of Knives is about engagement, then the House of Cold is its opposite. Religious conversion often has a trial phase of deep disconnection and non-engagement with one's loved ones and the outside world, often leading to a bleak worldview and depression. Henrike, Juanita, Karen, and Theresa each recount what disconnection felt like for them during this time:

I kind of felt like I was an outcast. ...In some ways, it's the underlying tragedy. So I had a lot of – like, one of my really better friends – like, my best friend, at some point – she was Catholic. So I had more Catholic friends, I should say. So a lot of the people in that [religious education] cohort – I mean, they totally were the same people that also took religion in high school. (Henrike)

And early on in life I loved reading so I became an avid reader. I didn't know how to pronounce the words but I would try my best and then I would look up the word, what it meant and stuff. So I was leaps and bounds ahead of my brothers because I was the youngest of eight and I was so

far ahead in education as far as my family that literally I felt displaced. (Juanita)

But back then she [a religious instructor] shot me down [when wanting to study Kabbalah]. I was looking for something. I was looking for my hook into Judaism. You know? Something that worked for me. And she shot me down. And I remember being so disappointed and so like “I don’t fit into this group.” But I always still remember still knowing I was Jewish. But I remember feeling at that point really like I really don’t fit in with these people. That’s what I felt like. I didn’t fit in. (Karen)

When I was pregnant with my child, it seemed like nobody really understood. The church shunned me and rejected me. And so that left me quite lonely, sad, depressed with a child that I was raising with the help of my parents. (Theresa)

In considering the details of what these four women suggest about their experience of disconnection, I am particularly taken by Juanita’s last comment: “literally I felt displaced.” What is the place that Juanita occupied when she felt disconnected that was different from when she felt otherwise? Henrike and Theresa echo this nuance of place when Henrike indicates that her sense of connection and disconnection is related to where she happened to be (i.e., in school with her Catholic friends or in church with other Protestants), and Theresa directly associates being in church (a place) with feeling connected. And though it is more abstract and metaphoric, Karen also indicates a sense of displacement as she looks for a “hook into Judaism” through her interest in Kabbalah. Her use of the word “hook” does not indicate that she is *fishing* for Judaism. Instead, she is looking for a hook *into* Judaism, where Judaism is something physical, stable, and solid. Use of the word “into” necessarily implies that she feels that Judaism could be an anchor for her if she were hooked into it. This indicates that she is in a state of being unmoored or adrift, words that imply a sense of placelessness.

These precise narratives give rise to questions about what it means to dwell, for any length of time, in the House of Cold. Is disconnection, a social phenomenon, connected to displacement, a spatial phenomenon? If so, what does this connection mean and illustrate in these examples? Casey (1993) suggests that it is precisely this sense of displacement that empowers my participants to move forward in their conversion, because of a deep seated need to recreate place during its absence. Casey says:

Confronted with the actual emptiness of modernist space, each of us attempts to move from the discomfort of disorientation in such space to the comparative assurance of knowing our way about. We do so by transmuting an initially aimless and endless scene into a place of concerted action, thereby constituting a dense placescape that, in close collaboration with our active bodies, guides us into orientation. Unplacement becomes implacement as we regain and refashion a sense of place. (pp. 28-29)

As I ponder Casey's words, it occurs to me that the House of Cold can only be a temporary trial. Though displacement may be a common phenomenon, no person can actually live in displacement indefinitely. Even Anzaldúa acknowledges that people pushed to the borderlands eventually create their implacement as borderland people. Thus, the trial to move forward in the religious conversion is not the disconnection and displacement, in and of itself. Rather, the House of Cold is about how one responds to the cold. To pass this trial, one must learn to recreate a sense of home, ease, or dwelling *even if the conditions are not optimal to do so*. Thus, to leave the House of Cold, one must learn to abide in the cold, because the drive to create implacement from unplacement becomes a natural force to lessen the "discomfort of disorientation."

The house of fire: Extreme pain and trauma. There is no nice or soft way to say it, so I will say it plainly. At one point in their journeys to a new religion, two of my

participants attempted suicide. Mary and Theresa both had very negative experiences with religion in their youths, and neither felt that God had something positive in store for their futures. Despite their attempts to end their lives, luckily both failed. But the extreme pain and trauma they felt in their spiritual lives left an indelible mark on the religion each would eventually choose. Ironically, Mary and Theresa both considered atheism (each embracing it for a time) and returned to Christianity. But this return was one where they had their eyes wide open, where no one would act as an intermediary to God anymore. Instead, they each brought a significant amount of study and personal conviction back to Christianity, but built on the solid memory of what it means to be someone who once attempted suicide.

How is it that pain can so clearly shape the trajectory of a person's religious journey? What does pain do in shaping someone's Being? Does pain have a residual or long-term physical effect? Before reading their individual narratives, I find it helpful to dwell on Beckett's (1954) words in his play *Waiting for Godot*. At one point, Pozzo reveals his spiritual outlook as he wistfully speaks to Estragon (as much to himself) about the almost inescapable suffering that is the existential world Beckett presents. "Pozzo: I don't seem to be able... (long hesitation)... to depart. Estragon: Such is life" (p. 50). Beckett chose to carefully slow down Pozzo's words by indicating a "long hesitation." Clearly, these are words that are heavy in meaning, even if they are short in length. I can clearly hear the weight of the pain Pozzo feels, and I hear a similar weighted tone in what Mary and Theresa recount below:

So I remember one day – I had been an epileptic when I was young, actually all through puberty, and finally I convinced the doctor that it really was okay for me to go off the medication, because I wasn't having seizures. But

we still kept a bottle of – and it was Phenobarbital then, so I decided I would take the bottle of Phenobarbital and see what happened. I think I had half a bottle left. So I have no idea how many pills these were. Just to see what was happening, because did it really matter whether I lived or died? Okay, if I didn't wake up, nothing mattered. If I woke up, okay, I woke up. (Mary)

I didn't like [being at home alone]. I didn't like myself. I was in a very depressed mode, eating, eating, eating – resulting – I mean, you know, food was my comfort. I had another daughter, two daughters from my husband at that time. And most of the time sending them up to my mother, 'cause I just didn't want to deal with children. Didn't want to deal with life. Didn't want to deal – had suicide attempts... just cutting myself, just overdose of pills – you know, different things like that, needing attention and not getting the attention that I needed. (Theresa)

I have read and re-read these narratives, because I fundamentally find the idea of suicide, even for religious or spiritual reasons, very hard to understand. Though I experienced several of the trials described above, I did not personally journey into the House of Fire during my own religious journey. Thus, finding significance in their stories feels distant. I need another example to give me insight into extreme pain and a longing for death. The one that came immediately to mind, though I shoved it out of my mind just as quickly (because it felt oddly inappropriate) was the story of Jesus Christ. Though it is not the only dimension of the story of Jesus, the incredible suffering Jesus underwent during the Passion is undeniable and is clearly heroic. Is there wisdom in the story of Jesus that can give insight into the pain my participants felt during their religious journeys? Indeed, metaphorically and mythologically, Jesus also underwent a trial in the House of Fire.

In the Book of John, Jesus says that he will endure the Passion for reasons that exist entirely outside himself. Jesus is quoted as saying:

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, for this purpose have I come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” (John 12:27-28)

In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (John 14:2-3)

In these quotes from the Bible, Jesus reveals the truth of his Being. He exists in a time and place where he sees his purpose as linked in the service of God and humanity. The point of his Passion is to satisfy the needs of the time as an expression of his own Being.

But what does this mean for Mary and Theresa? In an extensive analysis of the body and pain, Levin suggests a notion that connects the phenomythological experience of Jesus to the lived experience of Mary and Theresa. He suggests that focusing on extreme pain as the *sensation* of pain is to miss a deeper point. Pain is a personal gateway to understanding the truth of one’s historical moment. Levin (1985) says:

Sensationalism turns us away from the disclosive *presence* of the pain, and therefore from the primordial truth. What it offers is a mere *re-presentation* of pain... a shift from re-presenting the pain to being with it in the wholes of an experience that lets it simply be present... To the degree that we can simply be *present* with our pain, we are engaged in the process that *opens* to a new dimension of its truth, and we therefore make ourselves available for a new disclosure of its deeper historical meaning. [emphasis in original] (pp. 87-88)

The point Levin suggests is that, like the previous example of Jesus and the Passion, the suicidal pain Mary and Theresa endured in their religious journey clearly indicates something about the historical state of religion in our current collective context. From the outside, perhaps we see the actions of Mary and Theresa as extreme and perverse. Yet

in a context where religious ideology commonly masquerades as genuine spiritual engagement and ritual abuse runs rampant, extreme pain can be understood as a rational outcome. Unlike the rest of us, perhaps Mary and Theresa see most deeply into the reasons someone might have to leave the religion of one's origin. And in seeing sickness, they respond *logically* in turn.

The house of jaguars: Authenticity and deception. Religious conversion is a phenomenon that, for some, involves a certain amount of deception and a lack of authenticity to survive in the milieu in which one exists. Though it was quite unexpected, the story of one participant, in particular, haunts me with a sense that the transcript of the conversation did not adequately capture my lived sense that I was witnessing (and, hence, participating in) an elaborate and subtle performance, perhaps for my benefit. Junior is a fairly well-known politician in his state and has been re-elected to office many times. I was initially attracted to his candidacy for this study, because of his story of multiple conversions and the unusual combination of his social identities. Prior to our recorded conversation, Junior was very open to the study and indicated how positively he felt such a study could be in producing interfaith understanding. Upon my arrival at his office, I perceived him to be different, but the difference was subtle. I asked if he wished to discontinue participation, and he chose to proceed. During that conversation, Junior revealed that he had experienced difficulty being Black and Buddhist while running for office, and that it subsequently led to his conversion to a more traditional Black Baptist church. Junior elaborates on this conundrum:

I decided to pursue political aspirations. And then when you run for office, they dig up everything. They, and my dad asked me that when I told him I wanted to run for office, and he said, "Are you ready to live in a glass bowl?"

And I said, "I'm ready." ...The fish bowl. But then I lost the first time I ran, but then I started campaigning immediately right after that. But then it gave me a chance to find out why people didn't vote for me. And then where I represented, *when I ended up finally getting elected, when I was walking, talking to people and the word, because, see, the word will kill you in a community such as this. And the word was that I didn't believe in God. And they felt like if you were Buddhist that you didn't believe in God. And I said wait a minute now. So, now, I'm in, I was in a crossroad of where, what do I do?* How do I do this and not hurt my mom and then not hurt my dad, but then do the right thing that I felt was right and not faking the people out. Making them think that I really want to be Buddhist. So, I had to do some soul searching for myself. So, as I was pursuing running for office, they suggest to you to go from church – to visit the churches so that the preachers can introduce you. And I was doing that. [emphasis added]
(Junior)

Junior's story is complicated, because it contains within it several paradoxical and inconsistent notions that indicate his conversion to Buddhism was authentic, but that his conversion to the Baptist religion may have been political opportunism. Clearly, he believes that he bore the consequences of having a quasi-public conversion to a religion that is rarely practiced among African Americans. It raises real questions about what makes a conversion count as real? He currently attends the Baptist church and indicates that he is happy with it. Is a conversion that is born initially out of a sense of political coercion and ethnic solidarity real, particularly if it lasts? Is a conversion experienced through pressured missionary work not legitimate? Junior's experience of religious conversion is, in fact, his experience. His version of conversion may sound crass or cunning, but it does ask me to seriously consider the fact that religious conversion may have an exchange value that has nothing, strictly speaking, to do with religion itself.

Rather, it may be a way of coping with the coercive pressures of community or a way of meeting one's social needs in an unexpected or unusual way.

Another interpretation of Junior's manner of conversion is that it is an outright lie. Van Manen and Levering (1996) suggest that the process of keeping or retracting secrets can lead to lying. They state: "When we say that someone is lying, we mean that he or she is not speaking truthfully with the express purpose of deceiving, hurting, or damaging someone else or with the *purpose of taking advantage of a situation* [emphasis added] (pp. 128-129). Given the complexity of Junior's circumstance, I think it would be overstating the situation to suggest that he is "hurting" or "damaging someone else," but it is fair to say that he could be "deceiving" for the purpose of "taking advantage of the situation." After all, his goal to achieve political office coincides with his decision to leave the Buddhist community for a more politically palatable Black Baptist church. Yet if this is a lie, how am I to interpret it? Does a lie mean something different if it is accompanied by a need for stealth? Does the fact that he creates positive impacts in his community as a legislator obviate the lie and further legitimize his Baptist conversion?

One of the voices of another participant lends insight into these questions. Theresa expresses deep conviction to Christianity as a religion and warm affection to Black Christianity in particular, but also recognizes that deception may be a part of any religious experience. When I ask her when she felt most spiritual or what she felt like when she was "talking to God," she responds:

When I'm alone. Yeah, because, sometimes, I feel like, when you're in church and you're praying and you get – it becomes repetitious. And, you know, every Sunday, you see the sister at a certain time in the service, she starts shouting and jumping around. Is that really God every

Sunday at 12:45? Or is that – you know what I'm saying?
(Theresa)

Theresa's insight suggests that a gathering of people in a religious context will likely involve some kind of social performance, regardless of whether it is a socially approved or desirable context or not. For Theresa, solitude is the antidote against the need to perform. And for Junior, the need to perform may be of more import if he sees the infraction of continuously performing his religious identity as relatively minor compared to the major good he could do if re-elected to office (especially if he also observes the kinds of performances to which Theresa alludes).

The house of bats: Losing a piece of oneself. In the story of the Mayan twins, Hunahpu lost his head in the House of Bats, and was only able to move on when his body transformed. What is it like to have your own body or sense of Self be an integral part of the trial process of a religious conversion? Juanita was born male and given the name Arthur.¹⁴ Despite coming out early as gay (and having a boyfriend in her early teen years), Arthur's Catholic upbringing, coupled with the promptings of an inner voice, told her that she could not be male *and* engage in sexual relations with another man. Thus, Arthur concluded that she needed to become a woman to be consistent and whole in her religious upbringing. Juanita recounts a critical moment in her past when she confesses to her priest that she intends to undergo sex reassignment. Juanita says:

When I turned 17 – I went into confession I was baptized,
communionized, confirmed, and I went into the
confessional box and I said, “Bless me Father for I have

¹⁴ For the sake of respect to Juanita's current gender identity and expression, I choose to ignore the grammatical syntax of associating actions undertaken by “Arthur” with the pronouns “he, his, or him.” Thus, I will consistently use feminine pronouns undertaken by Juanita, even if it references a time when Juanita was male using the name Arthur.

sinned, these are my sins. I am homosexual and I intend to, fully intend to, resolve this by becoming a woman," and he just went ballistic [Laughing.] Father Williams of our Lady of the Mound in Kahlihi in Hawaii, he just went ballistic and opened the confessional box, opened my door and started screaming that I was condemned to hell, I could no longer receive the sacrament – in short he excommunicated me. Although that was not an official excommunication, it was an excommunication. (Juanita)

Juanita's experience indicates several processes going on at once. First, her engagement with the Catholic church was sincere on some level. She was trying to resolve what she saw as the conundrum presented by church dogma and her emerging sexuality and gender identity. Moreover, this was a moment of involuntary conversion for her. She was no longer considered Catholic, even as she was attempting to be in alignment with Catholicism. But what is lost here in the House of Bats? Clearly, Juanita saw that she had to lose a piece of herself, but which piece? Would she jettison Catholicism (a religion that deeply informed her life) or would she literally lose her penis, a part of her body that was now inconveniently connected to her and her sexuality? In considering what Juanita would give up, she weighed her options carefully. She reflects on a period in her life a mere three to five years later:

Between 20 and 22, and this is when, after being excommunicated, I had reached a point where, first, there was no God, and so I wrote – I was confused, because there's a male and female, with questions [on the spirit map]. "Do I need to be a woman? Is it imperative, or can I stay as a male? What are the benefits if I choose to go that way, if I choose, and what do I really want," et cetera, et cetera. And then there were questions where, "There is no God. There is a God." And then, finally, the last thing I thought of was, "Okay, there's something. There's something, okay?" And that is the agnostic period in my life. (Juanita)

The irony here is that Juanita experiences another kind of religious conversion to agnosticism, as one of the temporary way stations to which Casey alludes, and to continue with her decision to have sex reassignment surgery. By embracing agnosticism (and subsequently Buddhism) and changing her genitals, is Juanita now whole in the way that Hunahpu was made ready to engage with the Mayan gods? What is truly lost and what is truly gained? Did Juanita's penis betray her, or did she betray her penis? Is that question even fair? Could it not be said that Catholic doctrine betrayed Juanita *and* her body? Ultimately, Juanita suggests that the choices she saw before her were limiting, leaving her with less than what she might have been with more religious options. Juanita, now in her sixties, says:

I would say I've come to the realization that, not because it was painful or anything, I wouldn't have had the sexual surgery. I wouldn't. I wouldn't have gone to that area because who I am, I'm neither male nor female. It has nothing to do with what's down there. It has everything to do with how I want to use it. That defines who I am, and I realize that for all human beings you are neither male nor female. You are what you choose to live as. You could be male, but you could be living female. And if I knew that then I wouldn't have had the surgery. (Juanita)

Juanita is clearly at peace with her life choices and does not live in anguish over past decisions. Yet, her story is one which gives clear insight into the power religion and religious identification have in defining parameters for our own engagement with our bodies. For Juanita, religion whispered in her ear that her body had betrayed her, and thus reflexively, she had betrayed the church and God. What does this transfer of betrayal across the body mean? Is losing a piece of oneself always a betrayal? Van Manen and Levering (1996) give insight to how people relate to their bodies, even as those bodies betray the most intimate senses of Self:

If I am unhappy with the way I look or if I worry about my physical health, then I can try to ignore or suppress the demands my body makes on me; yet I cannot hide from my body. *I cannot separate my body from my sense of self.* But I can hide my body and thus my-self from the view of others... *We may feel betrayed by our body and those parts of our body that are nevertheless so much our own and so thoroughly familiar to us.* Yet most people seem to live in peace with the shape and nature of some parts of their body and in a certain dischord with other parts. [emphasis added] (pp. 94-95)

Van Manen and Levering's quote indicates that social expectations placed on the body will invariably lead to a sense of betrayal, because the body is always an imperfect, yet intimate, provider of identity. When expectations of identity come from without, the body will invariably, at some point, fail to meet that standard. This important link between a sense of Self and the body, however, is what is most noticeable in the House of Bats. When religious doctrine condemns something that is rooted in identity, that condemnation cannot hover in the ethereal space of psychic identity. Like pollutants flowing downstream, that guilt and condemnation must be passed back (down?) to the body as the font of identity. With this understanding, Juanita's body and sense of Self were set up to fail and betray each other by external forces. Thus, to leave the House of Bats "whole" is to survive this process *and remember the false choice that religion insisted was true* when looking for religious messages and social parameters that will no longer force the hero/ine to choose between Self and the body again.

Moving beyond the trials. In the story of the Mayan twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque make it through the various Houses (not unscathed, but ready) to meet the gods for a ball game. They are no longer in the Houses, but they are not yet among the Divine. Where are they? Who are they now that they have persevered? Is there a greater

purpose to what they have endured? Bridges (1980) provides a composite archetypal rite of passage that illuminates the liminal state or in-between place my participants may inhabit once they have spent time in their initiatory trials. Bridges describes this state of Being as follows:

The wounds of his ordeal... are healed now. But they will always bear witness to what he has suffered. They mark him as the one who has crossed the boundary of childhood and has put that life behind him. He is alone. More than simply out of contact with his peers and elders, he is absolutely and radically alone. In this time (or time-out) of his life, he is out of relation with all others. In space, too, he is beyond the edge of his old world. There is no map on which one could point and say, "There he is." There is no *there* there, since he inhabits for this time a non-place... At night he dreams, and the dreams of this primal non-time and non-place are full of enigmatic hints and presences. Each night he goes to sleep praying that this night will be the night of the great vision. It will be then and thus that he discovers his spirit guide or his guardian elder. That voice will tell him of his true vocation and his real name. (pp. 84-85)

Bridges' quote points to what follows. My participants are now firmly on their way to a new religious identity and have met all the conditions for such a journey. Their futures are currently out of focus, but a vision of that future can bring that new identity into clear perspective. So now my participants await their vision to discover the modern equivalent of a "spirit guide" or "guardian elder." They now await their own spiritual transformation to find their "true vocation" or a "real name." In those moments, they will encounter a new god and a new place to unfold their spiritual identity.

Approaching and Experiencing the Holy

Regardless of what my participants uniquely experience in their movement towards religious conversion, they arrive at a place of looking forward into the

possibilities the future holds. They see and wish to see into their respective futures. And in the act of seeing, they arrive somewhere as well. Some of my participants describe that *somewhere* using metaphors that capture the grandeur of the experience, often suggesting that words themselves fail to capture it fully. Others state that their search for ultimacy and transcendence was disappointing, and instead chose to focus their spiritual quest within the goodness of the humanity where what is true is solidly rooted in empirical ways of knowing. Either way, that arrival is accompanied with a different sense of what is absolutely or ultimately true through individual experience. In the phenomenon of religious conversion, some “reach the mountaintop” of certainty while others “arrive at the crossroads” of uncertainty. Where they end up is ultimately a reflection of who they already are, individuals who have experienced certain trials in their search for meaning and the expression of God that they already recognize within. But to arrive at this metaphoric place, they must first see its possibility.

Desiring a Vision Quest

Once having weathered trials and challenges, heroes and heroines are ready for their Divine encounter. But where should they go? How will they know when they arrive? What signals or signs will mark the way or will herald that their conversion is complete? At the point of ritual purity, religious experience and conversion is a mere vision away. Levin (1988) provides a sense of why the need for a vision quest follows a trial. He suggests that pain is one root purpose of why people cry out for a vision of the Divine. Of this connection, he says:

This work on vision began, not with a vision, but with an experience of crying. Crying for the earth itself, whose devastation I see all around me. Crying over the plundering of the land. Crying from the depths of my ancestral body

for the victims of the Holocaust. Crying for the Indians massacred in my country, for the last of the dying guardians of the earth. Crying with them. Crying in kinship with all suffering being. Crying in participation, in sacrifice; but also in thankfulness for their spirit of sharing. With the crying, I began to see, briefly, and with pain. Only with the crying, only then, does vision begin... crying is not something we “do.” Crying is the speech of powerlessness, helplessness. (pp. 171-172)

My participants have already done the crying part, and from those tears, they wish to see different vistas hued in promising possibilities. The vision will come, but of what? This vision is not the traditional kind of seeing that we associate directly with daylight and the eyes. For even in the daylight, God is not immediately visible. We must see with different visionary eyes that do not pierce the darkness, but are embraced within it. This is not the vision that one measures in an ophthalmologist’s office, nor it is about achieving pinpoint focus or the ability to scrutinize something in fine detail with the sunburning effect of pure light. Rather, this is a different vision, one that is rooted in experience of the world as it is: going from light, to gray, to dark and back again. This vision is not solely captured in the eyes, but in the whole body’s understanding of what lies before it, especially as a hero/ine sees and understands what is not right in the world. Levin (1988) says that a conversion will necessitate a vision of the night:

For it is during the night, the night of the soul, that we open our eyes, the organs of our visionary being, to other dimensions of reality, of Being; dimensions we desperately need to remember and integrate into the prevailing, consensually validated reality of daily life, since everyday life in our present epoch is controlled by the ego-logical subject and its metaphysics of presence. (pp. 349-350)

I am captured by the sense that a vision quest rooted in the wisdom of the night is one where the “ego-logical subject” is silenced for a moment. In the space opened up by that

silence, several of my participants step into an unfamiliar and uncomfortable role uniquely suited to describing the what the Divine “looks” like from afar: the seer.

Becoming a seer. In *The Illiad*, Kalchas the seer must discern why Apollo is sending a plague to harm the Greek warriors of Achilles. Citing Homer (1961), Heidegger (1984b) tells us that Kalchas was able to perform this mystical role through his careful observation of a flock of birds. “Kalchas, Thestor’s son, far the best of the bird interpreters, who knows all that is, is to be, or once was... through the seercraft of his own that Phoibos Apollo gave him” (Heidegger, p. 33; Homer, p. 61). As mentioned above, however, this role was not simply undertaken with the eyes. A seer’s vision came from a careful assessment of the entire body. What sounds did the birds make? How did one feel in their presence? Were there scents that accompanied the birdsong? And most importantly, what was the total impact of the tableaux? Said another way, what was the image of Being that the seer could discern in that moment? My participants also had moments of vision in their religious conversions that are akin to that of Kalchas. Art, Juanita, Karen, and Mary detail those experiences below:

It’s frightening to see how people can – I’m speaking in general how just people can lose their intellectual capacity, their critical intellectual capacity in some simplistic belief of a trinity that they don’t even think through and then the practices that supposedly stem from that, that don’t even translate into, “Well, what are the fundamental questions facing society, in the U.S., globally, internationally?” [emphasis added] (Art)

The whole point of it all is because that awareness, it led to even more of an impact as far as religion went, that I *resented the church because I could see the destruction that was coming about to my family based on their connection and beliefs that were espoused by this church.* [emphasis added] (Juanita)

I could see the social consciousness aspect. [emphasis added] (Karen)

I love the freedom I now have to see Gd's Light within the kindness of others. [emphasis added] (Mary)

Though they use the word “see,” each of the above quotes indicates that seeing is something that goes well beyond eyesight. Art’s vision is “frightening” to him, because he can see a connection between religious indoctrination and public policy. Juanita is also able to see portents of the future based on the religious conviction of her family. Karen and Mary were able to see deeper into the social milieu than they could before. But what does this vision mean? How is religious conversion connected to seeing a vision, or more enticingly, a vision for the future?

Heidegger’s (1984b) rendition of the *Anaximander Fragment* pays special attention to the role of the seer in his/her ability to have a holistic understanding of Being that is not readily available. By being in the right “place” or state of mind, this seer is able to discern not simply *Dasein*, but *Dasein*’s whole interconnection with the world around it. With this special insight, these participants are able to discern their future identity in light of how the whole makes sense for them. Heidegger provides a more robust sense of what the seer sees:

The seer stands in sight of what is present, in its unconcealment, which has at the same time cast light on the concealment of what is absent as being absent. The seer sees inasmuch as he has seen everything as present... The seer is outside himself in the solitary region of the presencing of everything that in some way becomes present. Therefore he can find his way back from the “away” of this region, and arrive at what has just presented itself, namely, the raging epidemic. The madness of the seer’s being away does not require that he rave, roll his eyes, and toss his limbs; the simple tranquility of bodily composure may accompany the madness of vision... *All*

things present and absent are gathered and preserved in one presencing for the seer... The seer is the one who has already seen the totality of what is present in its presencing. Said in Latin, *vidit*; in German, *er steht im Wissen* (he stands in knowledge). [emphasis added] (pp. 35-36)

This vision hearkens back to Levin's (1988) understanding that vision is connected with the act of crying. The seer is able to see the entire existential reality (in all of its purity and ugliness) and continue gazing with calm composure. They see all: the Divine, the abyss, all *Dasein* in between, and they do not flinch. Heidegger's quote is particularly useful in understanding why religious converts can act as seers, because they are able to see "all things present and absent." Heidegger's insight about *Dasein*'s ability to take in the fullness of reality is echoed by Merleau-Ponty (1968) as well when he says:

If we turn now to the seer, we will find that... the look, we said, envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them. (p. 133)

As mentioned previously in Chapter 3, God is often experienced as an absence that heavily weighs on *Dasein*'s sense of reality. The holistic interpretation of this absence is precisely what leads someone who "stands in knowledge" to make an initial conclusion about the nature and existence of God, a logical prerequisite for a religious conversion.

Seeing one's own face: Images of religion. When looking into a connection with the Divine, I believe that it is important to be able to see oneself in that image. Heroic journeys often involve metaphors of self-reflection and self-understanding. This human need is captured in the Japanese story of Amaterasu, goddess of the sun, as she retreats into the cave when Susanowo, god of storms, defiles her temple. In grief, she hides herself away, focusing on her hurt and ignoring the impact her absence has on the world.

Just as the physical world would perish without the sunshine, the myth of Amaterasu also portrays the *kami* (life force) of the world dying. To lure her out, the goddess Amanuzume dances to create mirth among the gods (who have prepared a special mirror placed outside Amaterasu's cave). In spite of her sorrow, Amaterasu's curiosity gets the better of her. She peeks open the cave and sees her own magnificent reflection and instantly recognizes the huge error she has made. Indeed, the moral of the myth is that *all living things need to see themselves in Her reflection; all life needs to be mirrored in the divine sun.*¹⁵

My participants echo this deep need in several conversations about how God is conceived in the human imagination. In pursuing their new religious identities, they considered the depictions of God and weighed it among other factors. Though an atheist, Ben nevertheless vividly recalls on his spirit map how his mind imagined God (he was told) “reflected” all human beings:

I remember I drew this. This looks really funny. It's just a face with every color scribbled on it. Cause I remember someone telling me that God is every single race and he has every single color skin. And this is what I imagined. So it's a little absurd but that's – I was okay with it. (Ben)

It is interesting to note that this is the one place where Ben did not bristle at the notion of a God in which he did not believe, because he had suggested elsewhere that he felt this image of God, though “really funny,” is positive and made sense. In other words, for Ben, if one were to believe in God, at least that God should reflect all people. But what does it

¹⁵ A similar understanding of the connection between living beings and God is also found in the Christian narrative of Mary's Song, The Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55). At one point in the song, Mary implies that there is connection between her and God in that “He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden” (verse 48).

mean when a person on a spiritual or religious journey does not see himself or herself?

What is the effect of joining or maintaining membership in a religion that never mirrors one's existence back? Is it better to be negatively portrayed than never portrayed at all?

Mujahid seriously wrestles with these questions as a Muslim who grew up among deeply religious African-American Christians. A particularly poignant memory of this engagement with the image of God is an exchange he had with his mother over popular representations of Jesus. He recounts the tale in conversation with me:

Mujahid: She had all of the picture of all of us [her family] at various times with various ceremonies. High school, college, Marine Corps, dah, dah, dah. And then in all those pictures right there there's a picture of this Caucasian Jesus. (Laughter) So I come here one day. I say, "Ma, you know the white man is out of place. He just don't seem to fit in the family photo gallery right here." [Mom replied:] "Boy, that's my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." I said, "Ma, he's the white man. I don't care what you say about the Lord and Savior thing right there. That's the white man right there." I said, "And besides now," I'm gonna go a little bit further." I said, "And it's confusing, we know that – you and I know that he ain't God or the Son of God." [Mom says] "Look, don't you be coming in here with that stuff in here. I'm telling you that right now." So I said, "But mama, we know." And I said, "But for the sake of the grandchildren and stuff right here you may want to check this out now." So she said, "What you mean?" I said, "Because Stacy," that's the granddaughter who was over that day. My sister's daughter. I said, "Stacy's gonna think that's God." She says, "No she don't." ...I said, "Yes, she will." About two minutes later I saw Stacy come to the door. ...I said, "Stacy, come here, baby." ... "Who is him? Who is that right there?" She said, "Who?" I said, "Him, the white man." She said, "Him, Uncle?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Him God." Yeah. ...I said, "Mama, she can't see it no other way." I said, "Besides that, she'll start seeing white people in his image as being like that too."

Mark: And that she's not in that image.

Mujahid: Makes it even worse in that right there. The next time I came over that picture, man, she took that picture down. Took all those years. That picture was gone. That picture – she took it. Struggled with it. (Mujahid)

In this exchange, Mujahid indirectly reveals a major reason why he chose Islam in his religious conversion. Islam's aversion to having God depicted in human form has the effect of potentially being available similarly across differences such as race. With Mujahid being one of two African-American participants in this study, I pay special attention to this concern, especially when I observe it reiterated in popular media. Monk Kidd (2002), in her book (and film) *The Secret Life of Bees*, tells the story of a Black family who raised bees for honey. Specifically, she recounts their special relationship with an image of the Divine that overtly reflects Black womanhood as positive and powerful:

“How come you put the Black Madonna on your honey?” I asked. I'd been curious about this from day one. Usually people got in a rut putting honey bears on them. August grew still, holding a jar in her hand and looking into the distance like she'd gone in search of the answer and that finding it had been the bonus of the day. “I wish you could've seen the Daughters of Mary the first time they laid eyes on this label. You know why? Because when they looked at her, it occurred to them for the first time in their lives that what's divine can come in dark skin. You see, everybody needs a God who looks like them, Lily.” (pp. 140-141)

Monk Kidd's narrative suggests that a vision quest for God (or, I would speculate, any religious experience such as conversion) requires more than simply catching a glimpse of God in isolation from everything else. The heroic vision of the night needs to contain a vision of the Self, of *Dasein*, in phenomenological *relation* to God.

Seeing the stars as stars. Though it sometimes feels oddly placed in a study of religious conversion, there is sound legitimacy to converting to atheism. Indeed, some visions never come or never come to pass. This is not to say that the atheist participants did not experience similar heroic trials prior to this process. Indeed, they did (as illustrated above). The difference is that they did not see what others have claimed to see. In their vision of the night, they did not see God. Instead, they saw the actual heavens full of stars and drew meaning from the physical, modern, and observable universe. The most vocal of these participants is Ben. He describes his experience as a process of conversion away from the dogma of Catholicism, but he clearly bristles at any suggestion that his journey is less legitimate, meaningful, and joyous (i.e., less heroic) than that of someone who feels a spiritual or religious connection. Ben says:

Through my deconversion/conversion, I became aware of the larger skeptical inquiry movement. I realized that challenging what I believe is important. *Very few beliefs are without consequence, so I have a duty to ensure that I am well informed...* I now fully prefer reason and evidence to dogma. If any dogma is true, it should be verifiable through reason and evidence... Atheism itself doesn't tell me to do anything. It's just one belief. It doesn't have anything to do with anything else... In terms of interactions with people, I hear a lot of people say, "Since you're an atheist you have no reason to believe in morality," and they keep going off about this objective morality. I hear this all the time and quite frankly I'm not really sure what they're trying to say. They usually phrase it as a reason to believe in some sort of god, and *I try to point out that if god doesn't exist, it doesn't mean there's not some sort of objective morality.* [emphasis added] (Ben)

Ben's quote suggests that a mythological, heroic journey of religious conversion can still be rooted in an moral ethic of responsibility to one's fellow human beings and *not* in God. His reasoning is that his beliefs, like all others, have consequences in the

actions he undertakes. To avoid doing harm, Ben ensures that he is “well informed,” where that entails a process of scrutiny that nevertheless adheres to logical, humane “objective morality.” Does seeing purpose in the physical world mean that one’s life is less moral or not guided by a compass? Can one still be heroic and not believe in the stories of heroism? Indeed, many myths are understood as stories we plumb for meaning. For these participants, they simply see all myths as stories.

For my atheist participants, they do not move to a state of communion with the Divine, because it is something that does not exist in their world with enough substance to have meaning.¹⁶ Their trials and aborted visions provide *comfort within doubt* of all things religious and create an opening where empiricism flourishes. For others, however, communion with the divine is the final treasure for which they have toiled. After the trials and the various visions of God, they come, at last, to a flash of the Divine.

Communion

When on the precipice of an experience of the Divine, what comes to mind? What does a person feel? Having prepared oneself, are there doubts? Does the desire for God overwhelm potential fears about what that encounter might look like? Suzuki (1950) suggests that the desire for God would overwhelm any fear, because only the actual experience of the Divine would ever truly satisfy someone in search of religious expression. Indeed, the phenomenon of religious conversion ultimately hinges on what happens in these transcendent moments. Suzuki says:

¹⁶ Though my participants do not express any transcendent or ultimate experience, I do not wish to imply that atheism and this kind of experience are *necessarily* irreconcilable as they reintegrate into their world.

What one thinks or reads is always qualified by the preposition “of,” or “about,” and does not give us the thing itself. Not mere talk about water, nor the mere site of a spring, but an actual mouthful of it gives the thirsty complete satisfaction. (p. 52)

Suzuki relates the importance of direct experience in tandem with my participants as one, without prompting, went right to the heart of the matter in one of the group conversations. Wolf’s more modern version of Suzuki’s water metaphor surfaces when he poses a pointed question to his fellow participants:

And I was wondering if, you know anyone had an experience like you saw God or, you know that sort of moved you on to the next level or made you wake up and smell the coffee so to speak? The divine java. (Wolf)

Though Wolf’s quote allows for the grand possibilities of God using phrases like “moved you” or “next level,” it is his reference to “divine java” that most captures the imagination. In this sense, Wolf is referring to something warm, comforting, and savory. It implies that a connection with the Divine is more than mere esoteric experience; rather one feels deeply satisfied after every delicious, frothy moment. The allusion to pleasurable, bodily sensation is clear and paints a picture of what God could feel like: erotic and tempting.

Though it is often typical to portray God in purely pleasurable and loving terms, that may not adequately capture the true depth of a Divine encounter. In contrast to Wolf’s description, Mary’s perception of Divine communion, very similar to that of Hildegard of Bingen’s vision of the universe as an acorn, indicates another possibility for what God looks or feels like:

Something core. Something that feels like – it feels like the inside of a peach seed. So you eat the peach, you get to that hard thing, you throw it out. But if you could crack it open,

there's space inside with a little germ of a seed. So it felt like that space. (Mary)

There is nourishment in Mary's vision, but it is something that only comes after a potentially frightening or painful experience alluded to in the language of "crack it open." Mary also understands that the Divine is tempting in the way that a peach is sensually tempting and sweetly delicious, but she goes further. There is more there than pleasure, because the pit itself has purpose, albeit a purpose that is predicated on some discomfort and even death. Mary's experience appears as an echo of the message in John's gospel when Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

It is in these two descriptions where Divine experience can be characterized as *Eros* and *Thanatos*. Yet in separating these two possibilities from each other, the phenomenon of religious experience and movement is not nearly so distinct. Thus, conversion implies a flexible understanding of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, where both are direct, immediate and *overlapping* experiences of God. And even allowing for the overlap of the two, does this dichotomy fail to fully capture the experience? Can any words truly capture it? My participants attempt to describe their experiences below, some using images of *Eros*, others of *Thanatos*, and others simply left grasping for words. In many respects, the conversion/communion experience of my participants mirrors that of Arjuna (the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*) after Krishna reveals Himself as God. Arjuna says in Chapter 11, Stanza 45: "Having seen what no mortal has seen, I am joyful, yet I quiver with dread" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 141).

***Eros* and ecstasy.** The pleasure of God is often described in poetic terms, but plain terms also provide texture to more erotic, divine qualities. Why is it important to

consider divine eroticism? What is it about the erotic that brings religious conversion more into focus? Lorde (1984) provides a sense of the useful purpose that eroticism has in developing meaning in a human life. She says:

Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes *a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives*. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. [emphasis added] (p. 57)

For Lorde, that which is erotic provides a kind of control against which other experiences are weighed and considered. When the Divine visits a person as *Eros*, that supreme pleasure becomes a benchmark of what is possible after the eroticism fades. Thus, erotic experiences are embedded in memory and what is remembered across time. With this lens made explicit, Mary and Theresa recall their moments of divine connection through their bodily memory of that moment. They recount:

So I had the crucifix, I had this New Testament, but I had gotten down on my knees with the quasi-foxhole kind of prayer of, "I don't know if you're there, but if you're there, I want you in my life." And *I physically felt movement on the inside*. It was as if I had been – *like there was a person inside of me that had been here, and now the person shifted over here*. It was just like I had changed – I don't know, changed worlds. I had no idea where I was going with this. I happened to see the New Testament there, started reading it from the beginning and could barely put the thing down. [emphasis added] (Mary)

It just felt good. It just felt like this is something familiar. You know, this is *a familiar thing inside of me and it's sparking something in me and I want it...* So when you get a sense of yes, there is something out there that's continuously helping me to get up, helping me to move forward, helping me to go on to the next level of my journey or whatever. When you've been in that dark place and you come out into a place of light, yeah, you believe, I

believe that there is something out there that's pulling me out of those places. So yes, I have those divine moments frequently. [emphasis added] (Theresa)

In these moments of *Eros*, Mary and Theresa both allude to pleasurable feelings on the *inside* of their bodies. My conversation with each indicates that this was not something as obvious or literal as sexual intercourse.¹⁷ Rather, it was a feeling of interiority and intimacy that is perceived within the body. What is it about the inside of our bodies that feels intimate or erotic? Why is “insideness” memorable? What meaning can be discerned from a divine experience that is predicated on a sensation of play within oneself? Simply, why is the inside of our bodies considered erotic and open to *Eros*? What does it even mean to be open in this sense?

Lingis (2000b) explores the idea of inner sensation when he is simply engaged in conversation with another human being. Of one such memory, Lingis recounts:

The tone of the one who addresses me does not respect but pervades my inner space. His sounds are in me now, my body has become his. Inhaling and exhaling the air, the drift of pheromone, catching hormonal rhythms, my breath and his commingle in the atmosphere about us. (p. 100)

In this quote, Lingis suggests that a sense of interiority in the body is connected with a perception that one's own body becomes possessed or owned by another, and the rest of the quote indicates that this change of ownership is a pleasurable experience.

¹⁷ Though my participants do not refer to divine experiences in overtly sexual terms, such descriptions are not unheard of. Many modern Neo-Pagan communities, for example, revere masculine and feminine duality through the Great Rite where masculine and feminine principles literally come together. Most Great Rite rituals are, I suspect for practical or logistical purposes, performed symbolically with a cup and dagger. Yet some groups practice the Great Rite as sacred sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Similarly, other traditions such as Western ceremonial magic and Tantra in Hinduism and Buddhism refer to left and right hand paths to enlightenment often associated sexual polarity.

Clearly, we exist in our bodies, but what does it mean for a person to share that sense of ownership with another? Lingis also connects this inner movement with the breathing of air, that substance that regularly reminds us of the eroticism of movement within and around the body. Does the common connection of Divinity and the air imply that both are also connected to a daily, constant eroticism? Does this mean that a religious experience that pushes one to conversion is suffused with a sense of God moving us on the inside the way the air moves our torso? And as the body responds to the air and/or to God, is that response innately erotic? The entire concept of *Eros*, it would appear, suggests this is true.

Singing: Sharing eros. Our society has created social rules against experiencing *Eros* in an obvious or public way. But my participants suggest that the pull of religion has been an unexpected vehicle in the erotic experience of the Divine. Mary and Wolf had an exchange in the group conversation that reveals the way that music, and singing specifically, brings groups of people into a bodily eroticism of God in the same spirit as St. Augustine's often quoted "*qui cantat, bis orat*" or "He who sings, prays twice" (Sermo 336). The excerpt of my participants' exchange follows:

[I] started singing in the church. And it was a wonderful experience. The more I sang or somehow there was a *closeness that I felt inside myself* and a spiritual connection when I was singing and when I was playing musical instruments that I would never have any other way... Two hundred and fifty people, 300 people at these prayer meetings. It was an interesting experience, because you would start to – when people would sing, they had a corps of people that would play the guitars and get the music going, so you had all of these people who were there for a variety of reasons, but most of them were participating in this emotional experience of God. [emphasis added] (Mary)

Mary's recollection again references the interior dimension of Eros when she describes divine "closeness" as being "felt inside myself." But this closeness was a shared experience, something sensed inside *and* outside her body. Mary also describes the self-aware state of being among 300 people who were sharing that "emotional experience of God." Though Wolf and Mary have very different theological beliefs, their erotic experiences of God are very similar to each other. Wolf soon responds to Mary's description of singing with her church as he recounts his own experience of singing at a Witchcamp summer festival. He says:

Something that Mary said really resonated with me. You said that when you sang that the divine – you had a divine experience. And up until I participated in a ritual with 100 witches and permitted myself to actually *let go and to sing*, up until that point it was very academic. It was a matter of belief. It was intellectual. It was philosophical. But it was not experiential. At that point I felt something that I categorize as divinity. And how I felt and what it, you know, the transformation that my life has gone through since that moment, you know, how I characterize that really doesn't matter. (Wolf)

Wolf alludes to the singing as clearly erotic and an eroticism that is shared in public "with 100 witches." Yet his reference alludes to the sense of bodily ownership that Lingis describes above. Wolf says that his ego would not permit him the experience of the Divine, because he was always in control (where control is described as "belief," "intellectual," and "philosophical"). Only when Wolf "let go" and started singing, did he experience the erotic Divine, and that experience was clearly one where letting go implies a loss of ownership over himself within that experience. To experience the Divine through singing and ritual, Wolf had to cease tightly owning his body so that *Eros* could

sing with, and through, him. And in singing genuinely and authentically with *Eros*, Wolf truly converted and became a witch.

Thanatos and fear. When I was a child, I could not understand why people who “feared God” were referred to as good people. My own childhood understanding of God was permeated with fear, but that was a fear inspired and stoked by my interaction with manipulative adults. The fear of God, I would learn much later, is something very different: a trembling awe that can be divinely inspired. Though described in opposition to *Eros*, *Thanatos* is not its polar opposite. Rather, *Thanatos* is the other, less popular, feeling that can accompany a single experience. Mujahid gives language to the blurred experience of *Thanatos* when he recalls having experienced “Grace” upon the death of his father:

When I knew he [Mujahid’s father] was gone [died]
something was overwhelming me. It was taking the life out
of me. And that’s when I received my first visible help.
 Grace. As to whether that’s the first place I can remember
 – I experienced grace. I didn’t know what it was then. It
 was like seeing a body standing up. But it wasn’t standing
 up. It was being held up. It was being held up. [emphasis
 added] (Mujahid)

Mujahid’s description of *Thanatos* is complicated, because he describes it briefly before it is soothed by his recollection of the *Eros* blended within. In the experience of his father’s death, Mujahid distinctly recalls that something outside of himself was removing something (life) from his body. In this sense, *Thanatos* operates as the exhalation to the implied “inner” inhalation of *Eros*. Taken together, *Eros* and *Thanatos* are a singular experience of the Divine in that breathing in and out of the body is nevertheless a singular act. What is it about a sensation of pulling out of the body that inspires fear or awe? Does religious conversion imply a “breathing” of God into one’s

body? Would someone convert away from a religion where “breathing God” is already present? If not, does conversion mean that one’s old religion is experienced as “dead” or “without breath,” especially the necessary exhalation of *Thanatos*? Is it truly possible to experience the Divine as an everlasting inhalation of *Eros*?

Lingis (2004a) gives insight into how *Thanatos* is a necessary component to religious experience and conversion through his description of the Tibetan Buddhist ritual of *chöd*, often called *The Red Meal*. During this ritual (performed by a single person), the celebrant “dies” at the hand of a sword-bearing goddess who beheads and disembowels him or her. Thereafter, the body is consumed by animals and mystical ghouls. And why would someone willingly undergo such a ritual? What lesson is to be learned from *The Red Meal*? The celebrant’s chant during the ritual inspires the wisdom in this embrace of *Thanatos* as the exhalation of life:

For ages, in the course of renewed births I have borrowed
from countless living beings—at the cost of their welfare
and life—food, clothing, all kinds of services to sustain my
body, to keep it in comfort and to defend it against death.
Today, I pay my debt, offering for destruction this body
which I have held so dear. I give my flesh to the hungry,
my blood to the thirsty, my skin to clothe those who are
naked, my bones as fuel to those who suffer from cold. I
give my happiness to the unhappy ones. *I give my breath to
bring back the dying to life.* [emphasis added] (p. 144)

Cleary, the Red Meal is about gratitude for the life one has lived and for everything that had to die to make that possible. Again, my attention is particularly caught by the reference to breath and breathing. In the chant, this breath literally is a sharing of life force in the way that God is imagined to breathe life into inanimate material. When describing his own experience of the darker side of the Divine, Wolf echoes the exhaling of life force that leaves his body. He says:

[It's like] being transported, being moved, you know one second you're like this and the next second you're like on the floor *gasping for air*. And it's not a heart attack or whatever. That was that moment for me. (Wolf)

But how much can *Thanatos* take before it is too much? Though this exiting sensation in the body may be a part of the conversion experience, it's not pleasant. Does the experience of *Eros* have to outweigh *Thanatos* to make the convert want to continue the process? Mary appears to capture the full, intertwined nature of divine experience in her reflective journal:

When I've prayed for Gd's¹⁸ presence to manifest itself - or for me to find it - or for me to simply desire Him - do I look for the big river? ...If I'm looking for the Mississippi or the Colorado, I have to be prepared to experience a lot of cutting. Space must be formed for the flow... The answer, of course, is to have a heart that is brave and not afraid of *HASHEM's terror* (even if the form of men), but also one that is soft and sponge-like towards His will. This is the best medium through which the flow of the *Ein Sof* will carve out its path.... it is known in a word: *Tiferet* (Harmony/Beauty/Balance). [emphasis added] (Mary)

Mary makes explicit reference to "terror" as a part of Divine experience, but qualifies it as something that must be moved through for that experience to work and make sense. Using her metaphor of a river, the river bed has to have some consistency to contain the river ("bravery" in the face of *Thanatos*), but also must be soft enough to be shaped by the water ("sponge-like" toward *Eros*).

Indescribable. Religious conversion encompasses everything described up to this point, including all that is prior to the immediate experience of the Divine (certainly for

¹⁸ Though Mary has not technically converted to Judaism, she observes many Jewish customs. In her journal, Mary uses the intentionally different spelling of the word God as *Gd*. For the sake of consistency, I did not change her spelling.

my participants who identify as atheist or agnostic). Yet for those participants who define themselves, on some level, as a believer, there are parts of the heroic journey that cannot be chronicled when trying to make sense of the experience. To attempt to give language to this facet of religious experience in the conversion process, I turn to Henrike. She mentions a time when she was on vacation and spent time in a Catholic convent adjacent to the Vatican:

Later on we took a family trip to Rome when I was around 15 that made a huge impression on me. Although I was, you know raised Lutheran it was kind of the, I guess the way you described it. I mean it was just undescrivable, indescribable. (Henrike)

I believe that the fact that words fail her is a part of the phenomenon, particularly because Henrike thinks of herself as an agnostic who has experienced some sense of the Divine. The failure of language, description, and coherence is what it means to move beyond the human and knowable into the ultimate and transcendent. Despite all of his metaphors that I have previously explored, Wolf insists that all of that language is a pale shadow to his personal experiences of the Divine. He says:

No words could describe the actual experiences that I've had. I can describe them in words, but no words can do them justice... The problem with the word is it doesn't really begin to tell what it feels like on the inside. (Wolf)

What does it mean to be without words? Can an experience that has no words feel certain, or does a lack of words lace it with doubt? Indeed, the self-effacing word is even found in scripture. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a Hindu scripture, suggests that even holy words are insufficient (and possibly misleading) when trying to understand (or certainly describe) the experience of God or how that experience can be guiding in a conversion process. Chapter 2, Stanza 46 says: "As unnecessary as a well is to a village on the banks

of a river, so unnecessary are all scriptures to someone who has seen the truth” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 54). Given the fact that words and thinking are intimately connected, is wordlessness the purest state of communion where God (as *Eros*, *Thanatos*, and perhaps other equally indescribable children of Nyx) is given ownership of the body by the ego?

But what does this private wordlessness imply of the experience? Merleau-Ponty (1962) investigates the inability to speak in his exploration of sexuality (closely related to some aspects of divine connection) and suggests that there may be an unconscious or subconscious motivator in *not* finding words to describe God. He says:

Insofar as the emotion elects to find its expression in loss of speech, this is because of all bodily functions speech is the most intimately linked with communal existence, or, as we shall put it, with co-existence. Loss of speech, then, stands for the refusal of co-existence. (p. 186)

In following Merleau-Ponty’s words, it would appear that there are some experiences of the Divine that are even more private than *Eros* (which can be experienced among hundreds of people singing). Is the inner sanctum of religious conversion a place where religion becomes spirituality, implying something so personal that the social rules, conventions, and restrictions of language and sociability become intolerable? When experiencing God in this way, does the convert subconsciously wish to maintain an absolute boundary between all others and the tender/terrifying connection between God and him or her? If others are truly unwelcome in this inner place, is this why speech fails? Can we ever truly know if the indescribable Divine experience of one person has any semblance to that of another? This remains, perhaps forever, a mystery.

A New Place to Stand

Though a religious conversion can contain within it many facets of the experience of God, those direct experiences interact and inform the convert's sense of spiritual place and time because conversion implies *taking time to go somewhere else*. Where and when do these spiritual moments happen? What boundaries, real or imagined, are crossed in the process of overt religious conversion? What decisions inform this sense of time and place? By being situated, located, and provided a rich sense of time/place, *Dasein* obtains deeper understanding of the mystery in which it is surrounded. In this sense, a heroic journey of conversion takes on an ongoing temporal and spatial dimension rooted in the metaphor of where one has been. Campbell and Moyers (1988) suggest that this heroic emplacement happens in a variety of places. They say, "You leave the world that you're in and go into a depth or into a distance or up to a height. There you come to what was missing in your consciousness in the world you formerly inhabited" (p. 129). Metaphorically, my religious participants often found themselves on the Mountaintop, at the Crossroads, or in a complex combination of the two.

Reaching the mountaintop: Bounded place and time. The climbing of mountains is a readily understood and common metaphor for the liminal space where a religious experience and conversion happens, often comprised of pivotal moments of time and grave consequences. In this metaphor, place and time are pronounced and clear. I suspect the metaphor's ready availability to my Western participants is perhaps due to the powerful biblical stories where mountains feature prominently. For example, Moses experiences God as the burning bush by climbing "Horeb, the Mountain of God" (Exodus 3:1). Moses strips Aaron of his garments on the top of Mount Hor where "Aaron died

there on the top of the mountain” (Numbers 20:28) and also saw the promised land when commanded to “Go up into this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the people of Israel” (Numbers 28:12). And Moses ultimately receives the Ten Commandments and conveys the mountain’s power of place as he delivers the commandments to the Hebrew people. He says:

The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb...
The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain. (Deuteronomy 5:2-5)

All of these examples reference the mountain to indicate a time when something religiously important happened and, subsequently, reify the mountain as a metaphor of measuring a spiritual connection and designating a sacred place as the engagement with the Divine. It stands to reason that time itself would be measured in the Bible by movement from mountain to mountain.

Several participants made overt use of the mountain as a metaphor of experience in their own religious conversion stories. Mujahid and Theresa refer to the mountain as a place of struggle that, in turn, yields new opportunity as a reward for that struggle. Mujahid’s mountain reference occurs when suggesting that his own spiritual journey was deeply influenced by his own experiences of racism and that directed towards his community. His conversion is given a sense of place via the eerily prescient words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the mature Islamic spirituality developed by Malcolm X after King’s death. From those words and Malcolm X’s calm defiance before his own assassination, Mujahid places his steady conversion to Islam within the struggle for racial justice in a racist America. He says:

And righteousness you feel calm about it. Even if it means you have to give up your life. In the movie *Malcolm*, in the end Denzel caught the moment though... when they're getting ready to shoot Malcolm he leans into the bullet and smiles... If you saw the movie, just as the gun fired the smile came on his face. Well, he was, even if it means he has to give up his life. We heard Dr. King that night in that church in Memphis. [Malcolm X] saw it. Said, "I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there." (Mujahid)

Theresa describes her conversion experience much more directly through a mountain metaphor. Referencing her spirit map, she has a series of mountains in her past and sees future mountains she must climb. In this sense, her life is a series of places she must steadily encounter over time:

Even though I had many mountains to climb, those mountains, instead of going from – my mountains went from pain, struggle, sorrow, long suffering. And it started coming into hope, knowledge, wisdom, joy, peace. And I'm still climbing my mountains. (Theresa)

When asked what her spiritual journey would look like into the future, she discusses it with the same metaphor where the mountain is an obstacle to overcome. Theresa says:

The mountain that I see is to be in places where love doesn't abound and I want to see that love abound.
(Theresa)

One participant is very literal in the role a mountain plays in his religious conversion and the sense of peaceful clarity it gave him. Art tells of a time in South Africa when he found his youthful religious identity transformed by a visit to a mountain. He surprised himself by spontaneously following an urge he had after his own visit to the mountaintop:

Here's a paradox. Coming down the mountain one day... I stopped in at a church at the foot of the mountain. It was lovely to just sit there in a very sort of reflective way. And

to feel pretty content, relaxed and tranquil and whatever.
 So I'm just saying the need for that kind of time or mood or
 zone or whatever you want to call it, it was still there. (Art)

Art had a spiritual experience that was prompted by his visit to the mountain that cried out for reflection, even if it meant going to a place in which he had serious doubts. I am drawn to the way Art grasps for existential descriptions to describe where he had been. The mountain (and the church at the base) coalesced together into "time or mood or zone," a phenomenological bonanza of meaning. This mountain prompted serious consideration of lived time, feeling, and space (respectively), and Art suggests that this event filled a particular need he failed to realize "was still there."

And though Mary and Wolf do not directly allude to a metaphor of a mountain in their interviews, they reveal a very bounded sense of time and place in their spirit maps. Wolf's spirit map contains a moment in his life when he attended Witchcamp (literally in the mountains of West Virginia) as a place of spiritual transformation. And Mary's map alludes to a sense of climbing in various parts of her map. Both can pinpoint a specific, narrow window of time around their multiple experiences with conversion. They say:

I think the vegetarian was coming first and then this other thing [her youthful love for, and disappointment in, God], but it was all pretty well tied in together, time-wise. We're talking probably weeks. (Mary)

It was Yuletide 1991. I walked into my apartment in New York, and I saw the Christmas tree. And I started to call it the "Christmas tree." Then I said, "Who am I kidding? This is not a Christmas tree. This is a Yule tree. I don't see this anymore as having anything to do with Christianity. And I'm not going to look at it that way anymore." (Wolf)

For these participants, the mountaintop is a place that is easily referenced, because it provides specificity in place and time yielding confidence and certainty. But not

everyone goes to a mountaintop to commune with the Divine. Others journey into the heaths, moors, and other wild places to finally arrive at a place of connections across different directions, a place where multiplicity is celebrated: the crossroads.

Arriving at the crossroads: Ambiguous time and place. My participants also experienced God with a more ambiguous and less-defined sense of time and place which I recognize here as the crossroads. In the crossroads, the once-fixed nature of time and place can be more fluid and crave boundaries.¹⁹ Indeed, this destination often provides more questions than answers and begs future journeys from those who find themselves in this out-of-place place.²⁰ Thus, the crossroads provide a sense of being in between worlds during moments of conversion. In these places, time is noticeable because it speeds up or slows down in much the way Beckett (1954) describes the surreal world of *Waiting for Godot*. “Vladimir: That passed the time. Estragon: It would have passed in any case. Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly” (p. 51). Though Mujahid experiences a real “mountaintop” of clarity around Islam and his connection with God, his experience with the Divine has occasionally happened in the crossroads. After the racially motivated death of his father (and his subsequent experience of “Grace”), Mujahid lives in a parallel time than that of his own family. When recalling that time years later with his mother, Mujahid says:

¹⁹ It is important to note that the crossroads is a place unconcerned with consistency and rationality. In keeping with this definition, several of my participants visited the mountain *and* the crossroads.

²⁰ Some encounters with the Divine are described as out of time and place, in the way humans are said to stumble into the world of the faerie via portals or crossroads. Perhaps the most famous story of such a crossroads encounter with the Divine would be the Celtic story of Thomas the Rhymer and his amorous encounter with the Faerie Queen.

I said, "You know, Ma, I remember when the house burned down and Dad got killed. You were gone such a long time." She said, "No, I wasn't." I said, "No, no, I'm talking about this time Mama when the house burned down." She says, she said, "Baby, I wasn't gone for but about three weeks." I said, "No, no, Mama, you was gone for three, four months. Almost a half a year went by." She said, "Now you and I haven't ever disagreed about those events, cause I know you remember them." I said, "Oh, there it is." ... The event just. Phew. And then she wasn't there, so it slowed everything down to me. (Mujahid)

Karen avoids clear definitions of this kind of experience by describing it using ambiguous terms with an unbounded sense of time:

It was much more fluid and all over the place. It wasn't like one single moment. (Karen)

There is only one thing that is certain in the crossroads. It invites contradictions and inconsistencies as a place to consider one's options in the resolution of those contradictions and inconsistencies. A resolution of that ambiguity must be made through making a choice in much the way that Hecate forbids travelers from leaving her crossroads without resolving to take one path or another. What is the result of such a choice? Having been in a less substantial place and time with the Divine, what do people take away? Is the crossroads a place that leaves a traveler forever in a misty place? Henrike and Karen suggest that the simple act of making a choice in this non-place hones one's critical thinking skills and creates distaste for absolutism and certainty (which, rightly or wrongly, they perceive as a noticeable trait in Christianity). They say:

In Christianity, it seems to me, conversion is framed as a pretty specific event that occurs within a restricted brief time frame. Saul becomes Paul after a life-changing experience. I do not think that this perception of conversion is generally useful, although it may apply to some people. Such a conversion would necessarily push one to fundamentalism, where one strips him/herself of qualities

and beliefs in all suddenness and replaces them with others without little reflection. (Henrike)

When it comes to questions about God, you know, is God black or white? Is god in the sky? Is there heaven or a hell? Or this or that? You know? I think most, especially Christians, there's a definitive answer. And for me it goes back to the whole gray thing and actually it doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm just trying to live a good life. (Karen)

Henrike's insights are particularly salient here, because unlike Ben, she is not overtly atheist. She is a self-described agnostic who nevertheless feels affinity for Buddhism and sublime moments of spiritual significance. It is precisely within her ambiguous identity (and her comfort in that identity) that the crossroads becomes a visual metaphor she developed in her spirit map. Henrike is at the center of her crossroads, and she invites all the contradictory and inconsistent messages and experiences to join her there. Similarly, Karen makes use of the color gray to describe what her spiritual place looks like. For her, gray is not colorless, gloomy or depressing. Rather, it is a way to express a life lived in between overly confident polarities of black and white. Their time in the crossroads creates flexibility in how one perceives and experiences the Divine, because this is a heroic journey into ambiguity itself. I suspect that these participants would nod knowingly to the words of André Gide. "Believe those who are seeking truth. Doubt those who find it" (as cited in M. Kumar, 2008, p. 241).

Understanding mountains and crossroads. But ultimately, what do these place and time metaphors mean? How does a visit to a mountain or a crossroad shape the experience of conversion? Are pain and/or joy connected to the process of realization here? What happens to a person when climbing a mountain or leaving a crossroad *after* that experience? What lessons are gained and how is one's life different for having been

there? Casey's (1993) description of dimension and direction with respect to the body helps understand why these two places are archetypal in the religious journeys of a hero/ine. To understand the body's influence of dimensionality, he traces a Western predisposition to favor polarities of particular directions back to Aristotle (1882), who asserts what (I believe) continues to appear to be culturally true in the West. Casey cites Aristotle's Book III, Chapter 3 of *On the Parts of Animals*:

And it is a universal law that, as regards above and below, front and back, right and left, the nobler and more honourable part invariably is placed upper-most, in front, and on the right, rather than in the opposite positions, unless some more important object stands in the way.
(Aristotle, p. 66; Casey, p. 90)

It is precisely in this bodily sensing of the world that the metaphors of mountain or crossroad make sense. Each is experienced via the body's association with what Casey calls "landscape features" where the use or reference to a particular part of the body designates and defines the meaning of place across an entire landscape. Of this body/landscape connection, Casey (1993) says:

The issue is not whether this is in fact the case for everyone; not everyone may "lead with the right" when climbing a mountain, or even be aware of leading with any side of the body in such a situation. What matters is that the body, in its asymmetrical sidedness, is actively engaged in movements of ascent or ingression, descent or egress, and that these movements are themselves engaged in—and by—certain specific kinds of places. (p. 92)

In the case of mountains, the body recognizes the mountain as a space that goes up (a preferred direction) from all sides. From the phenomenological starting point of the body there is no wrong way to ascend. Thus, the mountain represents a pinnacle of positive associations. As a corollary, the body also recognizes itself through comparison

to the mountain. It starts in a down position relative to the mountain top, and necessarily sees itself as diminutive and weak relative to the strength, hardness, and stature of the mountain. With the constant “up” and “large” implied in the mountain, the body reflexively experiences that journey as a divine ascent. It then becomes easy to see why the gods are associated with mountains across the globe, because humans dwell where frighteningly large giants are not.

When considering the religious overtones of the mountain in this study, I notice one more element of the mountain: it’s connection with *thanatos*. To understand this connection, I go back to the first time the Bible mentions Moses’ interaction with God. When on Mount Horeb, “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6). Likewise, Jesus is said to have endured his final moments of transcendence while hanging on the cross at Golgotha, literally meaning skull hill (Matthew 27:32). In other religious contexts such as Native American spirituality and religion, Black Elk (1993) describes this kind of experience (akin to *Thanatos*) using mountain imagery and by calling the religious seeker a “lamerter.” Once prepared, the lamenter “is now ready to go up to the high mountain, there to cry for a vision” (p. 12).

Mujahid and Theresa echo these possibilities as each describes the mountain in grand terms mixed with the pain of *Thanatos*. For Mujahid, he confidently saw his own story of conversion in light of the painful, though rewarding, lives of Dr. King and Malcolm X, where both examples are larger-than-life and tragic. Theresa saw in retrospect that she had to climb numerous mountains of larger-than-life painful concepts before she could experience happiness, where even happiness is described as a mountain to give a sense of the work involved in experiencing joy in one’s life. For Art, the

experience of the mountain reveals the unflinching need he has for something greater and meaningful in his life. And for Mary and Wolf, this was a time period where each describes their lives as having been clear, but also tempestuous. Mary was contemplating suicide, and Wolf was about to turn his family upside down through divorce.

Each of these stories reveals a *possible* outcome when visiting the mountaintop. When having undergone such an experience of the mountain (with its clear associations of “up” and “large”), *Thanatos* becomes real in a way that provides a level of certainty and purpose in the life that follows. Clearly, Moses and Jesus are grand examples of biblical heroes who ultimately express religious certainty, after they have endured significant pain. Yet my participants also convey a *sureness* about their experience that appears to be fed by the uncertainty that preceded their mountaintop experience. Thus, the pain becomes ironically grounding and reassuring in the destabilizing moments of upheaval in their identity. Once grounded and having experienced that shift in religious identity, the mountain places a burden on them to share their transformation with others. Gibran (2007) captures this urge in *Sand and Foam*:

You may have heard of the Blessed Mountain. It is the highest mountain in our world. Should you reach the summit you would have only one desire, and that is to descend and be with those who dwell in the deepest valley. That is why it is called the Blessed Mountain. (p. 228)

Gibran describes the now-familiar mountaintop, because this mountain extracts a toll from any who would climb it. That toll is implied in the words “should you reach the summit” and the description of being the “highest summit.” Once there, Gibran notes that the urge to share the painful experience is paramount, particularly in sharing with those who would never venture to such a place. Is this the place from which the urge to

proselytize comes? It would appear that the mountaintop provides an experience of pain coupled with certainty that others should know about that experience.

On the other hand, crossroads are vastly different. If the mountain implies “up” directionality and “large” dimension, the crossroads offer mixed messages to the body. Bassoumb (1993) provides insight into multiple and confusing meanings implied in the crossroads after his initiation into adulthood among the African Bassa people. He says:

I learned that the crossroads are not only where people coming from south, north, east, and west meet, but there also come together the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the archaic and the contemporary, the young and the aged, the visible and the invisible, the world of the living and the world of the dead. Crossroads. (Bassoumb, 1993, p. 18)

Unlike the uni-directionality and overwhelming dimension of the mountain, the idea of crossroads implies a necessary choice that ultimately leads to good or bad, fortune or misfortune, salvation or ruin. It also contains within it many aspects I associate with *Eros*. It joins disparate parts into a new whole capturing the magic of sexuality and sexual union. The pleasure of *Eros* also suggests a need to seek balance across the different directions, because *Eros* can be unpleasant or awkward when given in excess or small doses. Indeed, the crossroads is a place where the body experiences *Eros* on its own scale, a human-sized proportion. Cultural wisdom may suggest that there is only one safe or “right” way to go, but a heroic traveler may know that the left hand path may hold adventure or a different definition of success. Lacking an up/down directionality and having human-sized scale means that the world of the crossroads presents itself to the traveler as an equal seeking dialogue about where to go next.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) adds a dialogic dimension when he says that the body's assessment of pure Being can only be accessed across intersections *with others*. He says that the "thickness of Being" is found here:

At the intersection of my views and the intersection of my views with those of the others, at the intersection of my acts and at the intersection of my acts with those of the others, makes the sensible world and the historical world be always intermundane spaces, since they are what, beyond our views, renders them interdependent among themselves and interdependent with those of the others. (p. 84)

This quote illuminates the possible connections that multi-directionality and smaller scale have with a willingness to engage with others as equals, even in the process of one's own religious conversion. When Being itself is made possible only at the intersection of my body's perception and the perception of others, I cannot grasp the nature of the Divine without inquiring into the perception of God by others. How did they decide which direction to turn when arriving at the crossroads? What does it mean to ignore the turns and continue forward into the unknown? Does God await the heroic traveler regardless of the choices made?

Some of my participants spoke of their religious conversion experiences in terms of developing a critical eye when engaging with others in the real world (steadily filled with inconvenient choices and multiple directions), not necessarily by oneself on a mountain. Henrike recalls an experience with a fellow graduate student who self-identifies as a fundamentalist Christian. Because Henrike experienced the Divine through the crossroads, she bristles at the notion of certainty that arises in this other woman.

Henrike says:

She said, "I know that I'm going to heaven," which is something – from my religious training, something that's

appalling to me. Because there is – that is – God is the final judge. You don't know whether or not you're going to heaven. That's up to God. (Henrike)

Though Henrike is appalled by this interaction, it nevertheless reinforces the power of engagement with another person. It is precisely through her interaction/intersection with this other graduate student that provides her a better sense of what God would or would not do. Indeed, without this other student, Henrike's sense of comfort with *not* knowing would not be as well developed.

Karen's experience of the crossroads also alludes to dimensionality. Because crossroads occur in the open, Karen resists the idea of being "in a box." She says:

So I totally recognize that my situation and the way I am is the exception than most people. Most people need that, those boxes. At least to a certain amount. Yeah. I'm just not one of those people. So I totally recognize that my situation and the way I am is the exception than most people. Most people need that, those boxes. At least to a certain amount. Yeah. I'm just not one of those people. (Karen)

In this sense, being in a box is the opposite of the flexibility and openness of the crossroads. When in a box, there is only one way to go: out. But Karen's allusion to this enclosed space suggests that critical thinking and openness are necessary components of her interaction with Divinity. And like Henrike, she knows this only in comparison (intersection) with the perspectives of others.

I believe that Wolf engages with this nebulous place intentionally and with a sense of humor, particularly when he notices that he has a lot in common spiritually with an atheist. During our group conversation, Wolf engages with other participants in the idea of uncertainty, noticing that it brings the heroic journey of religious conversion back full circle: again on a quest for meaning and identity. Wolf says:

One of the things I noticed is that Art and Ben talked about coming to a place of uncertainty. You know like the journey up to this point is like another starting point... You know that place of uncertainty is like where you come back to. And then that sort of clears the field for you to just move on to the next. (Wolf)

Having seen and chased their visions, and (for some) having an experience of the Divine where place features prominently, I find that I hang onto Wolf's last sentence. Regardless of whether one actually communes with God or its metaphoric location, all my participants endured a process of winnowing to embark on this journey of religious conversion. Like all heroic journeys, they each have obtained a kernel of wisdom as a trophy for their efforts. But Wolf's words haunt this moment. Everything that I have introduced above "clears the field" so that they may make the journey back as they "move on to the next." Levin (1988) supports Wolf's insights about the power of uncertainty as he brings my thinking back full circle to the idea that my participants first had when seeing their own possibilities of Being in their new religious identities. Though some ended up eschewing the nighttime "indistinctiveness," others embraced it. Levin says:

There is wisdom in our experience with the night that we desperately need to learn: an experience with absence, with fusion and indistinctness, with ambiguity, shifting boundaries, elusive and transitory presences, insubstantial apparitions, concealments, a sense of wholeness and integration, encounters with the night which disturb our settled sense of reality and penetrate our culturally established ego-logical defenses. (pp. 351-352)

After so much experience, what can compare to the experience (or disappointment) of God? What awaits these travelers upon their return? Can anyone ever

truly return to “the next?” My participants suggest that the process of religious conversion has consequences, an aftermath that follows them day-to-day.

Return to the Everyday

People develop everyday theologies not just when they worship and read Scripture but as they reflect on a wide range of inspirational texts, conversations, personal experiences, and understandings of their God. (Moon, 2004, pp. 13-14)

One truth that seems easily discernable within religious conversion is that people cannot bring the mountaintop down to the community, nor can the essence of the crossroads constantly overlay one’s waking moments. In a very real sense, the immediate experience of God (either in the seeking or the finding) fades, and my participants struggle to make sense of that fact. How does one abide in the mundane and recall a heroic past? What examples lead the way? I introduced the idea of a heroic journey through the story of Inanna, but real humans cannot fully emulate this myth. After all, Inanna becomes a goddess after her journey.

But another Sumerian myth is heroic and readily accessible to humans: the epic of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Each man overcomes significant personal shortcomings and engages a heroic journey to slay Humbaba the Forest Guardian (and later the Bull of Heaven). When Enkidu is cursed by the god Enlil and dies, Gilgamesh realizes that his adventures as a hero must one day also come to an end. Sandars (1972) quotes Gilgamesh as saying:

How can I be silent, how can I rest, when Enkidu whom I love is dust and I too shall die and be laid in the earth? (p. 102)

Gilgamesh attempts to cheat his mortality by finding Utnapishtim (a figure akin to Noah and his ark) to learn of immortality. Utnapishtim shows him where he can find the flower of immortality, but cautions that a heroic story for humans is ultimately a finite one. He says:

There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand forever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep forever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? (Sandars, 1972, pp. 106-107)

In the end, Gilgamesh never achieves immortality in the way of the gods. Instead, his heroic journey ends in glory, not because of an apotheosis, but because of what he brought back to his beloved city, Uruk. *We remember Gilgamesh because of how his deeds impacted others*. When returning from his last journey with Urshanabi the ferryman, Gilgamesh shares this epiphany with his companion:

Urshanabi, climb up on to the wall of Uruk, inspect its foundation terrace, and examine well the brickwork; see if it is not of burnt bricks; and did not the seven wise men lay these foundations? One third of the whole is city, one third is garden, and one third is field, with the precinct of the goddess Ishtar. These parts and the precinct are all Uruk. (Sandars, 1972, p. 117)

This epic story reveals an insight in the narratives of my participants. At some point, all heroic journeys come to an end and their lessons are about what is brought back to a community of people. What “bricks” or “foundations” are laid after a religious conversion? What do my participants bring back to the “real world?” How have their religious conversions shaped the relationships they have with family and friends? Where do they go from here? In their return, they know their lives will continually unfold, but now in a different direction. Some overtly mark their difference and let it serve as a distinction from their communities of origin. Some continue to see echoes of their

journey in the small moments of life. In considering their heroic stories, I realize that mythology is ultimately always an expression of the truth of human lives.

Re-Turning to Origin

Like Gilgamesh's final re-turn to Uruk, my participants return home and experience it for the first time, truly a re-turn. Now that they have donned a new identity, they find that their work is to reintegrate into their places of comfort and their relationships of closeness. In a sense, having con-verted (or turned) multiple times, it seems fitting that they turn once again to take stock of their lives from the only perspective that makes sense: their origins. Juanita and Mujahid express this journey home:

No, we don't leave it [home] – what it is, is we bypass it in order to expand and grow, and then, as we come full circle, we encompass it... See, the Catholic Church was taken away from me, and I think I had huge resentments about it, about the way it was taken away from me. And then, later in years, *after I became a Buddhist and really understood the Catholic Church*, I thought, "How stupid. I mean, I would have left it, so why resent the fact that that was done to you? Oh, grow up, you little bitch," you know. "It happened. Let go of it. Move on." [emphasis added]
(Juanita)

Actually, I told someone, "I'm not sure now if I had known Christianity the way I know it now, whether I would have converted to Islam." But then I said, "Yes, I would have" – because *I needed to convert in order to be able to see it. I couldn't have seen it while I was there.* [emphasis added]
(Mujahid)

Juanita's quote allows me to see and understand something about her religious origins. She understands that the emotional turmoil of being excommunicated by the Catholic Church can be understood in a widening context when she says "we encompass it." The encompassing allows her the ability to *be* in her origin, *and* above it. Juanita can see that

she would have left the church anyway, and her resentment simply dissolves. This dissolution is made possible because of her religious conversion, not in spite of it. Likewise, Mujahid suggests that he eventually would have left Christianity for Islam, but that the conversion itself provided him a deep appreciation for the religion of his origin. In fact, Mujahid relates that he could not have understood Christianity from within its borders.

Very much a poet in his own right, Mujahid offers explanation for the wisdom Juanita and he bring forward. He says:

Was it T.S. Eliot who wrote we should never cease for exploring and all of our exploring will lead us back to the place of our origin and we'll know it for the first time? It seems to not be there, but it seems to be the pattern. I can echo his sentiments and say that has certain legitimacy to it.
(Mujahid)

When he first paraphrased this quote to me, I remember making a mental note to see if he recalled the poet and/or the poem accurately. Remarkably, he very closely recalls a quote from T.S. Eliot's (1963) *Four Quartets* (Quartet 4: Little Gidding). I reprint Eliot's words accurately here:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (p. 208)

Eliot's words, closely echoed by Mujahid's insight, suggest that there is always a return to origin, because it anchors a person during a life's journey. We "know the place for the first time." Yet what does it mean to know it for the first time? It is because *Dasein* is now different and, in turn, the world around *Dasein* reflects that difference back. Casey

(1993) adds further texture to this understanding of returning to one's origin through the way he describes the distinction between homecoming and homesteading. He says:

In homecoming, I expect to experience the home-place to which I return to be something merely undergone for a second time, but I am surprised to discover that I grasp it for the first time in certain basic regards. In homesteading, I anticipate a first-time experience, but I end up with something strikingly second-time in status. (p. 296)

According to Casey, the difference lies in the expectations that one places on that moment. Homecoming is the experience of seeing something fresh and new, while homesteading is the opposite. The expectation of fresh is met instead with a sensation of ordinariness. Clearly, religious conversion is an experience that changes a person significantly in such a way that there is a desire to return to a place of comfort, but that place metaphorically no longer exists. Instead, my participants experience a homecoming where they are something of a stranger to a strange new place, even in returning home. They are like Hölderlin (2004) in his own re-turn home in the poem *Home*. He says:

Content the boatman turns to the river's calm
From distant isles, his harvest all gathered in;
I too would gladly now turn homeward
Only, what harvest but pain have I reaped?
Kind river-banks that tended and brought me up,
Can you allay love's sufferings, give me back,
Your forests of my childhood, should I
Come to you now, the same peace as ever? (p. 87)

The "same peace" is obviously a pipe dream, because the harvest of a new religious identity is difficult. And once home, what happens to religious identity? Is it finished? Does it continue to need shaping and mending? Is it like a musician's master opus that is never quite finished?

A Life-Long Journey

To a large extent, my participants say that religious conversion is a journey that continues throughout the rest of their lives. They are people still in process who nevertheless understand that who they are is the result of everything they have undergone to this point. Though somewhat lengthy, I think it is important to see the degree of emphasis my participants place on the sense that their religious journeys are ongoing.

So there's nothing I can say because the journey hasn't ended yet, but it's that you embark upon that journey or you journey authentically. (Art)

And I'm still changing now. Just like a week or two ago I decided that I identify primarily as an agnostic, not an atheist. An agnostic says, "Define God first." (Ben)

I think I'm still in the process, on some level. You know? (Henrike)

Spiritual nomad. Yeah, that's nice... Because the nomadic people definitely have their own community and they definitely have their own culture and they definitely have everything, they just travel with it. (Mary)

I had many mountains to climb... And I'm still climbing my mountains. I have a lot more life to live because there are many open doors. (Theresa)

Mark: Are you still on a journey? Wolf: Oh, absolutely. (Wolf)

It is at this point that I see how correct my intuition was in the beginning of this chapter. When conversing with my participants, I heard the words of Rilke (2005) when he says, "I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world. I may not complete this last one but I give myself to it" (p. 45). Having rendered these stories and exploring the re-turn of my participants, this poem bears even more meaning. The "widening circles" are not only patterns that one observes in life, but can also be

intentional journeys of exploration that take a pilgrim farther and farther from home. If religious conversion is one of these circles, what would constitute a widening circle? If the circle is something to which I “give myself,” who is ultimately in control of the experience?

I may decide to embark on that circle, but those experiences are not always up to me. It appears that my participants are comfortable with the sense that their journeys are not scripted with a particular outcome, and I suspect it comes from the knowledge they have *of themselves* through the memories of where they have been. Casey (2000) illuminates this point:

It is an inescapable fact about human existence that we are made of our memories: we are what we remember ourselves to be. We cannot dissociate the remembering of our personal past from our present self-identity. (p. 290)

Casey’s quote suggests that my participants cannot see themselves in any other way, because their conversion (a narrative of turning) is lodged in their memory *as alive*. The *time* of their conversion is past *and* present, because who they are now depends on the turn they took then. In a sense they are always “turning” in their memories, and thus, always on the journey that informs who they are now.

Declarations: Marking or naming oneself. Several of my participants suggested that it was important to make their new religious identity more noticeable and open in the way that Hölderlin (2004) describes his own heroic quest, in his poem *If To Those Warning Ones*: “Terrible Gods of Fate, ceaselessly drone in my ears. Yours I shall be in the end, I know, but first I’ll belong to None but myself and secure life for myself and a name” (p. 127). The reasons were varied, but there is definitely a need to express on the outside what is happening on the inside. Because atheism is reviled in society, Ben

currently chooses to actively place himself in his House of Knives experience. He thinks that it is important to be visible to others who are struggling with their own doubts about religion and spirituality. As mentioned earlier, Ben engages in “tabling” on campus at the student union where he, quite literally, makes himself available as a “mark.”

Others take a more dramatic approach. For example, Karen chose to mark her religious transformation on her physical body with a very elaborate tattoo, a physical naming of herself. Karen describes this mark and the way she now experiences the “openness” of this expression. She says:

Calf and shin and everything. But I did mark myself, and now I don't feel comfortable showing it because it draws so much attention. And to me, I don't need all that – it's like maybe at the beginning, I needed that to have clarity or legitimacy. (Karen)

Karen mentions that the tattoo was something that she needed “at the beginning” in order to “have clarity and legitimacy.” To what context did she return where her heroic journey would be seen as “less than” or illegitimate? This tattoo also suggests the point that her religious identity continues to evolve, because she no longer feels the need to show it the way she once did. What does a mark truly mean, if its meaning changes over time? Does it actually “mark” time, and by association, identity?

Though Karen's physical name (the tattoo) is truly life altering on her body, perhaps a deeper mark is one related to the *invisible* names and titles one bears after a religious conversion. Mujahid, Theresa, and Wolf have marked themselves in this way. For Mujahid and Wolf, it is a change of name that marks them as having undergone a transformation. Wolf adopted his new name (used in this study) as a moniker for his new identity among other witches. Many of Wolf's pagan friends know him simply as

“Wolf.” Likewise, Mujahid expresses a very complex relationship to his new name. He says:

I didn't [pick the name Mujahid]. It was actually picked for me... The root word is Jihad. Which means to struggle. And so Mujahid is “one who is engaging in the struggle.” (Mujahid)

For Mujahid, his name now suggests a constant rejuvenation of his heroic journey to Islam. Every time someone calls him by his new, legal name, he recalls everything that brought him through a religious conversion.

It is tempting to think of names as something insignificant or random. Indeed, Shakespeare writes about the complexity with names in *Romeo and Juliet* by romantically considering Juliet's assertion: “What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (II,ii, 45-46). But the opposite is true. The rose's name derives from its beauty and fragrance; precisely, it has that name because of what it *is*. Ultimately, Shakespeare tragically indicates that names do matter, so much so that even Juliet's marriage to Romeo does not alter the fact that she is named a Capulet. And if those names matter, what do they do for a religious convert? What is the point of adopting a new name? What effect does it have on one's Being? Wallis Budge (1983) tells of a particular moment in the mythological story of Ra and Isis where she obtains his name:

Then said Isis unto Ra, “O tell me thy name, holy Father, for whosoever shall be delivered by thy name shall live... O tell it unto me, and the poison shall depart; for *he shall live whose name shall be revealed*.” [emphasis added] (p. 55)

As Ra consents to give Isis his true name (which is never revealed), Isis reveals the power of names as something that is core to a person and whose power is exercised in the

revelation of that name to another. For Isis, Ra's name becomes a word of power through which she heals the sun god himself. The stories of my participants echo this understanding, because the point of adopting a new, post-conversion name is to be (and be seen as) a new person in one's community, those to whom the new name is revealed. Thus, the naming process is one where a new life is inaugurated through the communication of that name, a revealing of Being.

Though not as intimate as a name, titles also convey a sense of distinction while inhabiting a new religious identity. Theresa and Wolf both suggest that their religious traditions place emphasis on titles and are quite choosy when thinking about how to mark themselves with the burden of a title.

My pastor said – one day, he told me, he said that, you know, he wanted to ordain me as a *minister*. And I heard God say, don't allow nobody to give you a name that I didn't give you, 'cause God told me I was an *evangelist*. And I told my pastor, if you ordain me as an evangelist, I'll accept it, but I will not accept being ordained as a minister. (Theresa)

I don't think I actually had the confidence to just say "I'm a witch" until after -- if anybody talked to me about it and asked, I would tell. If we were talking about religion, I would tell them what I believed and what I professed. And I would say Wiccan, not witch... Because "witch" is an in-your-face scary term, and I wasn't really about scaring people. It was like I don't want to -- now I say it because it's really not scary anymore. Although maybe it is. I don't know. To some communities... I actually prefer "witch..." It's more direct. Simpler, clearer, and more direct. (Wolf)

The self-anointed titles "evangelist" and "witch" contain one degree of separation from the status of name. My participants say that these titles are very important, but do not name them to their core. And yet, they are particular and express much of what they have undergone through their religious conversion. Is it possible that titles and names become

a kind of core that is overlaid with another layer of meaning? If so, what does a title mean vis-à-vis a name?

Tennyson (1961) suggests that a title, however majestic or important, is not something that describes a person's core, but rather a person's calling or higher function. Before Arthur becomes King of the Britons and founder of the Round Table, he is a boy without a title. His title, King, is given to him by wielding the embodiment of that title: the sword Excalibur. Tennyson provides insight into the meaning of titles by his description of Excalibur itself:

On one side,
Graven in the oldest tongue of all this world,
"Take me," but turn the blade and ye shall see,
And written in the speech ye speak yourself,
"Cast me away!" And sad was Arthur's face
Taking it, but old Merlin counsell'd him,
"Take thou and strike! The time to cast away
Is yet far-off" So this great brand the King
Took, and by this will be his foemen down." (p. 22)

Prior to this point in the poem, Tennyson is careful to refer to Arthur only by his name (particularly when his lineage is unclear and potentially embarrassing). Uther and the other Kings of the land bear this title, but Arthur does not yet have it. It is only when holding Excalibur that Tennyson denotes the quiet bestowal of the title when in two lines he speaks of "Arthur's face" and then subsequently "this great Brand the King Took." But holding Excalibur is not something even King Arthur is supposed to do forever. The title, though important, is expected to pass on to another (reinforced by the idea that the language of "Cast me away" is always magically written in one's *own* language, not the "oldest tongue of all this world").

In considering these two mythological stories about names and titles, it is clear that naming is a core experience that is permanent in the Being of an individual, but not permanent in the world surrounding that Being. Its meaning is derived through the experiences one has undergone (like religious conversion), and its power is exercised in the sharing of that name with others. Unlike names, however, titles are permanent in the world around a particular Being, but are not *of* the Being who holds it. Said another way, names live within *Dasein*, but titles are of the worlding process around *Dasein*. For Theresa and Wolf, these titles indicate a connection with the world of their Divine experience where God bestows a title in the way that Excalibur did to Arthur. It is through this process of negotiation of meaning that names and titles bring participants back to the world of their origin where they are new on the inside (via their names) and often bear overt signs of connection with the conversion experience (via their new titles).

The Truth of Mythology

As I begin to close this exploration of religious conversion through the phenomythology of a heroic journey, I pause to consider the power that myth has in conveying the deepest truths of human existence (and for a phenomenon as complex as religious conversion). When considering the fact that many people do not literally believe in the truth of a myth (and that a myth is often defined as a fictional story), Bill Moyers posed a difficult question to Joseph Campbell (1988). Moyers asks: “Isn’t myth a lie” (p. 163)? Campbell deftly responds:

No, mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth—penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. (p. 163)

In quoting Campbell and Moyers, I mean to suggest that phenomythology allows me to render the experiences of my participants in the form of poetry, and mythic poetry in particular. What does poetry contain that gives it this power of expression? What counts as poetry? Many of my participants would likely suggest that they are not poets, though they do have grand experiences and describe them in very poetic ways. What inspires this kind of modern poetry? And what are the results of seeing religious conversion as an epic poem? My participants work to hold on to their experiences and keep them fresh. The result is that through the experience of their religious conversions, they begin to see the subtle elements of the sacred everywhere. In seeing the sacred in mundane things, they come to the understanding that the borders and boundaries that hemmed in their lives seem more illusory and unhelpful.

Finding sacred in the profane. When conversing with my participants about how they derive meaning in their lives from their religious conversion experiences, some paused and considered carefully what to say next. The pause was significant, because I could tell they wanted to tell me something, but were unsure about my reaction to what they would say. I always followed these moments with supportive language indicating that I wished to know the phenomenon through their experiences, regardless of how it might sound. I would soon learn that their hesitation was related to the fact that they were a tad embarrassed that the important messages of religion, spirituality, and the deepest questions of ultimacy were not always (or usually) experienced in an overtly religious setting. Some of my participants find the deepest insights in a mundane world that regularly reflects deep spiritual insights back all the time. Here are a few examples:

You're looking for meaning. And it wasn't only in religion
but, like, I used to like the Doors. I mean, that sounds

weird, but it's kind of – you kind of found inspiration in other forms of lifestyles, like crazy rock-and-roll lifestyle... Just kind of the zest of life. Just live it as it comes. I mean, that has inspired me, definitely. (Henrike)

My oldest son is a Transformers fanatic, so of course we were all going to see the movie... More than Meets the Eye, and a few other little things like that... I wasn't really paying attention and watching the movie until the end, where the kid says the family motto, and I get it. What was the family motto? "Without sacrifice, there is no victory." What is sacrifice? *Hod*. What is victory? *Netzach*. All of a sudden in this Transformers movie I said, "Oh, my gosh..." It was a spiritual experience... So I was able to put it all together thanks to the Transformers movie. All of a sudden that became a very important movie in my life. (Mary)

Most of the truth that I've found was in the other books that I've read, because I don't believe that you can – I know that the Bible is the book that has been written and, yes, it has truth in it. And those truths were put in there by inspired men and women of God. Well, since the Bible has been written, there are still inspired men and women of God that are still telling the truth. (Theresa)

But if I had to say where my ethical self comes from, I would have to say Stan Lee and Star Trek... There was a strict moral code in comic books... Totally blew me away. It still brings tears to my eyes. It's operatic in its scope. (Wolf)

The religious journey of my participants suffuses the world with elements of the spiritual in the most unexpected of places. They recognize that there is something to be gained in an overtly religious setting, but Henrike, Mary, Theresa, and Wolf also see religious possibilities in the Doors rock band, a Transformers movie, Spiderman comics and Star Trek, and an assortment of pop-psychology books. Is the world different? How is it that a mundane world is suddenly teeming with spiritual life? Does seeing the Divine in everyday places make the experience of religious conversion fresh and new? It is

precisely the ability to see this double vision of the sacred and mundane that indicates religious conversion creates a loosening of one's boundaries between the two. Thus, the sacredness of pop culture is what my participants first notice in their post-conversion life where borders and boundaries are not what they used to be.

Erasing borders and boundaries. My participants have become porous Beings who now no longer see the world with finite distinction. Their religious conversion gives them a unique insight into the interconnection of the world in the way that Rumi (1995) notes of his own religious experience: "This moment this love comes to rest in me, many beings in one being" (p. 249). Perhaps the most captivating image of this openly imbued sense of Being comes from Mary's spirit map where she illustrates her complicated Jewish/Christian identity in an open questioning way. She draws herself as having two heads that each face Judaism and Christianity respectively, but she does not indicate that this is a sorrowful place or a state of Being riddled with confusion. Rather, she is comfortable with the ambiguity and recognizes the strength of that posture. When questioned (and scorned) about her identity, being told that "oil and water don't mix," Mary stands rooted in her new complexity with ease and aplomb. She says: "I was the salad dressing, baby. [Laughter] If you shake it up enough, it's going to mix somehow" (Mary). Karen also experiences this deep mixing, because she has returned to her religion of origin and reclaimed it through the experience of her religious conversion to Buddhism. She says:

By learning about Buddhism and a little bit of Hinduism as well it brought me back to Judaism and it allowed me to find it on my own terms and it gave me the confidence that I have the birthright. I'm Jewish. I am Jewish and I'm gonna find that on my own terms and be Jewish on my own

terms no matter what anyone else says. Or says being Jewish is. Yeah.

But what is happening here? Are people converting to a new religious identity (singular) or to something plural? I do not think that this is simply consuming new religious identities in a simplistic add-on fashion. Rather, the journey of conversion breaks down not just the single identity with which one started, but breaks down the construction of identity as something concrete and fixed. Having changed religious identities, my participants recognize that they are in the process of negotiating past, present, and future identities into a cohesive whole, and this yields a bird's-eye view of what identity means.

Mujahid and Theresa define this third space of identity through what they see as common across religions. These insights rest on the assumption of interaction across religious identities in a "spiritual" and "loving" realm:

Really, that's where the growth really began to be, I think, real spiritual, because I'm beginning to see, like, "Wait a minute. There's a spiritual dimension over here in Buddhism that I find similar to Islam, and there's one in Christianity that's similar to this, and there's one in Judaism. Maybe it's the spiritual aspect that we should be looking at." (Mujahid)

I don't see any religion as incompatible with the other. All I see is love. If any religion, I don't care whether it's Hindu, Buddhism, Christianity, whatever it is, if your main concern is to come to the point of unconditional love, I don't care who you are. (Theresa)

Having come to an understanding of identity as complicated and fluid, my participants live out the insight that a conversion can create room within a person to hold the experiences of many people. Rumi's (1995) poem *Warrior Light* speaks of Mohammed's cousin, Jafar, in this way:

“Ignore the singularity. Look with your wisdom. He
 gathers multitudes, as stars
 dissolve in sunlight.” Human beings can embody a
 collective, a majesty
 of spirit, which is not like having a name or a body.
 A herd of onagers may display
 a thousand antler points; then a lion comes to the edge of
 their field: they scatter. (p. 250)

Like Jafar’s conversion to Islam, my participants are now vessels of many potentialities of Being beyond the singleness of their individual person’s “name or a body.” And when confronted by situations that question the validity of their stories (in the way that Mary experienced above), they are able to see themselves as one with humanity, including the questioner. As a single human, they can draw on the collective religious wisdom of all human beings in the way that a herd “displays a thousand antler points” to overcome an obstacle, but retain their individual story when the threat is addressed (as the onagers disperse).

Telling stories: Finis. Conducting this research has changed my own perception of myself, because I see myself mirrored in many of the experiences of my participants. They, too, express a sense of fulfillment and relief in the telling of their stories to someone who listens intently to those nuanced details. As persons who have returned from a heroic journey, participation in this study brings a sense of closure to their narratives in much the way Gilgamesh ends his journey, through telling and writing:

This too was the work of Gilgamesh, the king, who knew
 the countries of the world. He was wise, he saw mysteries,
 and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days
 before the flood. *He went on a long journey, was weary,
 worn out with labor, and returning engraved on a stone the
 whole story.* [emphasis added] (Sandars, 1972, p. 117)

My participants certainly went on a long journey with moments where they felt “weary” and “worn.” Ostensibly, Gilgamesh wrote on the stone so that the inhabitants of Uruk would always know his exploits. But I also suspect that he experienced a catharsis of the journey in the way that my participants did through telling their stories to me and to each other. I close with a quote from Campbell and Moyers (1988) as they describe the impact of a heroic journey:

A legendary hero is usually the founder of something—the founder of a new age, the founder of a new religion, the founder of a new city, the founder of a new way of life. In order to found something new, one has to leave the old and go in quest of the seed idea, a germinal idea that will have the potentiality of bringing forth that new thing. (p. 136)

I do not mean to suggest that my participants are going to change the world through their individual experiences. But they did found a new life for themselves, and that founding occurred through the exploration of “the seed idea” that was their religious identity. Religious conversion as a “germinal idea” is the notion that one discovers oneself through the quest for the Divine, in the seeking and perhaps finding. Regardless of the identities they now wear, I believe that each has accomplished this founding for themselves. It is my hope that this rendering serves as a “stone” for their stories. In my mind, these narratives of religious conversion are truly heroic.

Having explored the complexity of religious conversion and intensification, I now turn to the next, and last, chapter to consider the insights gleaned from this phenomenon and the implications derived from those insights.

CHAPTER 5
TO DEFY LIMITS:
REACHING INTO THE COMPLEXITY OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

For most of this study, my attention has been to the particular, often looking down, deep, into enclosed, marginalized or hidden places, all the while wrestling with their intricacies to bring them to the surface. This is the task of phenomenology. But having worked to bring those details to light, what then? Am I simply weighed down with endless details and anecdotes? Instead, do I have a coherent collection of narratives of religious conversion and identification that can say something beyond their single-person smallness? Can these stories of ten very different individuals inductively indicate a deeper truth about religious conversion, intensification, and ultimately, identity?

These narratives are not data that can be generalized in the strictest “scientific” sense. Through phenomenology, however, they bring insight into the phenomenon that is not about application to new or broader populations, but rather a larger way of seeing the phenomenon in the first place. In this sense, I now figuratively look up and out, seeking to expand the discourse, and perhaps shed more light, on the elusive mystery of how people come to identify with a particular religious identity. In what follows, I generally undertake three large scale endeavors: 1) consider of the value that insights (via narrative) provide the research process; 2) surface those specific insights into the phenomenon of religious identity as they engage existing discourses, notions, ideas and theories on the topic; and 3) offer suggestions for the ways educational spaces consider, treat, and create room for this complex identity.

The Necessity of Insight: How Does One “Weigh” Religious Identity?

Demystification is the task of phenomenology. (Levin, 1988, p. 454)

To convey the meaning behind religious conversion and intensification, I must consider how meaning is derived and conveyed from personal narrative, in general, and these personal narratives, in particular. The reason for this purposeful exploration is that phenomenological research produces insights into a phenomenon that exist through and beyond the stories that are exemplars of that phenomenon. In other words, to render the phenomenon of religious conversion and intensification requires that I yield some insight from the interplay of my participants' stories and my own prior work with those narratives. To do so, I turn to other phenomenologists as guides in this process. Of insights, Levin (1988) says that the whole point of phenomenological research is to have a deeper sense of learning from the experience of *uncovering* a phenomenon. He says:

Our task is a *recollection*, and in *understanding* this task, we are *gathered* into a process of deep experiential change. This process is insight, vision “outside” of the ego’s control, vision rooted in the soul, the spirit, our deeper self, the “inner light” of our visionary being. Insight betokens deep changes in the character of our visionary being. These changes take place “within” the individual; yet they are inevitably amplified “within” society and culture as a whole: they are, in fact, fraught with historical significance. [emphasis added] (p. 350)

In this quote, Levin suggests that phenomenological insights are actually a two-part process whereby “understandings” first take hold of the researcher, after having recollected (re-collected or “gathered”) the stories of a phenomenon, and subsequently engage the researcher in a personally destabilizing conversation that challenges the traditional or settled understandings of the way things are. This process of insight stands in stark contrast to more scientific understanding of “results” or “findings” that the researcher constructs from the data and subsequently delivers to an awaiting audience (sans “deep experiential change” on the part of the researcher). Once shared, those

insights travel beyond the researcher into the broader society, encouraging similar existential change and the phenomenological “nod” of understanding on the part of those who hear the story.

Narrative Needs Others

Levin’s words are useful in helping me construct meaning from personal narrative, but my own experience of collecting and analyzing data left me with a nagging doubt. I recall that my own conversations with one of my participants, Junior, led me to believe that his conversation with me contained elements of performance and multiplicity that made it difficult to discern what I thought to be the nature of religious conversion. On deeper re-collection, I gathered that Junior’s narrative did not disrupt my study, but rather forced my inquiry into various, previously concealed, directions (particularly the motivations and incentives around narrative description) where I came to the conclusion (or rather, the conclusion came to me) that religious identification could not *ever* be linked to a singular, limiting motivation. Narrative, it seems, is unsteady ground, but it is also fertile soil, teeming with life and possibility. Though I could not observe the actual moment(s) of religious conversion or intensification, I find that narrative provides much on which to interpret and expand.

Narrative can be useful for insight, but does it logically follow that it is also a trustworthy source in the revelation of *truthful* insight? Do the contradictory or inconsistent voices of my participants leave me with nothing coherent to say about religious conversion and intensification? Heidegger wrestled with this notion of the trustworthiness of truth, but also in exasperation questioned: “Why is it that we are ever and again so quick to forget the subjectivity that belongs to every objectivity?” (1984a, p.

103). He and other phenomenologists suggest that truth can be found, but it must be found in a *process* that allows me to see the words of that individual as possibly true prior to a hasty dismissal. In this process, an *a priori* subjectivity and objectivity are embraced together to form truth. Gadamer (1989) echoes this sentiment and suggests that I must not try to explain away the reaction of the other, but should engage it as if it were true:

It belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understand not the particular individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. Thus we do not relate the other's opinion to him but to our own opinions and views. (p. 385)

Gadamer's point is that producing truthful insight requires that I open myself to the ideas of the other person without sweeping them away simply because I cannot understand the behavior or dislike the person with whom I am engaging. It avoids the problem of deifying the self, because the self is necessarily selfish, wanting its own way and truth. In this sense, Heidegger and Gadamer urge me to give Junior the benefit of the doubt, because Junior's world makes sense to Junior, and I need to make sense of that fact.

Narrative Implies Transformation

Moreover, there is an additional requirement placed on me as I would lift up insights from those conversations. Parker Palmer (1993) concurs that the truth of personal narrative comes from the very process I underwent with my participants as I inquired about religious conversion and intensification (a vigorous Gadamerian engagement with others about the phenomenon). Yet he also adds that there should be a softening of myself to not simply hearing the truth of their words, but also being moved to a new place of Being by them. Palmer explains:

If my private perceptions are the measure of truth, if my truth cannot be challenged or enlarged by the perceptions of another, I have merely found one more way to objectify and hold the other at arm's length, to *avoid again the challenge of personal transformation*. This view isolates the self, creates as many worlds as there are knowers, destroys the possibility of community, and finally makes the other an object of no real account... If the criteria of truth are my perceptions and my needs, what claim can the study of science or history or literature make on my life? [emphasis added] (p. 55)

The point Palmer makes is that narrative is a more powerful place to create truthful insight, because in addition to the engagement with others (who have not been reduced into silence) for verification and amendment, I must be open to the very real possibility of personal transformation of my own view of truth and the insights that cascade from it. But how should I be transformed? In what way am I challenged into “personal transformation?” Nash (2004) suggests that those, like me, who construct truths through narratives should *feel* for those truths in a very intimate and immediate way:

It's all about loving ideas so much that we are willing to play with them, to take chances with them, to express our passions about them, to deliver them in some fresh, new ways; to nurture and care for them; and to continually test and challenge them in the company of others. I myself can best show my love for ideas by using stories—about myself, and about others—as a way to deliver these ideas. But, first, I need to show how these ideas really matter to me. Telling stories is my way of expressing my love for thinking. (p. 48)

From Nash I see that it is not enough to simply be transformed, but I must allow myself to be possibly transfixed with adoration for what I am beholding. In this way, narrative captures others by first capturing me.

Thus, I seek to implement the words of Levin, Heidegger, Gadamer, Palmer and Nash honestly as I analyze the lived experience of my participants, but how shall I

understand and hermeneutically interpret simple lived experiences and then convey that understanding here? Perhaps that experience can be likened to ordinary light, an apt metaphor for the fullness of lived reality. It occurs to me that when someone recounts their personal narratives, they struggle to speak of it in the same way that they lived it. Only when that light, a lived representation I call “text,” is refracted through a prism (a process of reflective analysis) does the “color” of experience break apart into the various bands of the reductive pieces of a person’s life (e.g., personal, institutional, cultural, and other factors of lived experience and identity). I find that this metaphor describes my own experience of gathering these stories and altering my own. Indeed, I, too, am changed in that illumination.

The First Insight: My Own Being in Transformation

There is a part of me that wants to avoid the telling of my own story as an insight, because it necessarily leaves me feeling exposed and vulnerable. But to redact it would be dishonest and would undermine the sincere dialogue I describe above. My engagement with the narrative of these ten participants is one that often leaves me surprised, bewildered, astonished, but also hopeful, energized, and excited about the possibility that I am getting closer to the essences my phenomenological approach promises. In short, my engagement and re-engagement with the words of my participants illuminates my understanding of religious identity and conversion, in general, as well as my own.

But what is this illumination? Reflecting on this metaphor of the prism leads me to understand that my own lived experience (indeed, all lived experience) and personal narrative are *not* the same thing. In fact, the latter is a deeply contextualized reflection of the former. Though I always experience reality as immediate, overlapping, superimposed,

and simultaneous, I cannot describe it that way in personal narrative. To engage with another dialogically about my own experience of religious conversion means to place my lived experience through the prism, to give someone else a particular strand of light, in a particular sequence, using words and phrases that ideally make sense to both parties in the hopes that shared experience will illuminate insight about the larger phenomenon I am investigating. I find that dialogic engagement must deliver personal narrative in lieu of lived experience, because dialogue is necessarily reflective, not immediately experiential.

Once given, what happens when that illumination of engagement connects with another person (as light touches an object)? Is my story reflected away or absorbed? What color is do I see in that engagement, and what meaning do I attach to that observation? And what do my participants, in turn, see in me? To explore and explain my own changes in religious identity and my understanding of that identity, I borrow an untitled poem by Izumi Shikibu (1990) lamenting the sense of disconnection she felt from everything around her after Japanese court society ostracized her for “unseemly” behavior. Shikibu says:

Watching the moon
at dawn
solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely,
no part left out. (p. 89)

Shikibu’s poem captures an epiphany about her own sense of Being, but what precisely is happening here? She is watching a sunrise and notices the moon in the morning sky. Initially, it is tempting to think that the word “solitary” refers to her, but careful reading of the poem’s syntax indicates that the word refers to the moon. In seeing the solitary

moon, Shikibu uncovers the truer, more hidden, nature of her own Being. Having undergone this journey of exploration of religious identity with my participants (another journey of uncovering hidden Being), I believe I have a greater understanding of how Shikibu sees herself in this unusual moment of sun and moon sharing the sky.

Shikibu imagines her Being to be solitary and independent from others, just as I used to think of my religious identity as “my own,” “private,” and “personal.” In fact, Shikibu thinks herself to be so independent that she often refers to the moon as a manifestation of her own nighttime, romantic wanderings. But that single moment where sun and moon share the sky reveals that the independent nature to which she, and I, held is an illusion. It would seem that the light, as is my own lived experience, and hence my religious identity and that of my participants, is imbued with meaning only upon reflection and engagement with another. Just as the moon does not exist in isolation from the sun, neither do Shikibu, nor I, have “identity” that exists, or is created, in isolation from others. Lived experience, like light, is an interconnected and interdependent expression of Being.

Heidegger (1984a) explores the connection between the metaphor of light and the truth of Being as he seeks to explain the way, and the purpose for which, Being enters the world. The first role for light is the creation of place, a “realm” where Being encounters the illuminated other:

The word “light” means lustrous, beaming, brightening. Lightning bestows the shining, opens what shines to an appearance. The open is the realm of unconcealment and is governed by disclosure. (p. 103)

In being illuminated and seen, the realm “opens” the possibility of engagement to that which “shines” a reflection back, namely, other Beings in that realm. It is in this

interdependent reflecting where concealment yields to disclosure, where isolation in religious identity reveals a truer connection through the sharing of identity. Yet, for Heidegger, light does not *passively* set the stage and the ground rules for the engagement between two Beings. It *proactively* presents, opens, beckons, introduces, uncovers and calls forth *mutual* engagement:

The lighting, therefore, is no mere brightening and lightening. Because presencing means to come enduringly forward from concealment to unconcealment, the revealing-concealing lighting is concerned with the presencing of what is present. (p. 119)

Just as when the sun and the moon share the sky in Shikibu's poem, the light of lived experience proactively asserts that those engaged in dialogue must "enduringly" work to uncover one another's presence through a continued process of reflection and revelation.

But I find that I was unprepared for what happened to me in a protracted engagement of Heideggerian presencing. The uncovering is a messy process, because it cannot be done without inadvertently picking up pieces of another story, turning to find that the story of another person has become one's own (not as a base appropriation, but as an acknowledging incorporation of the insights of that engagement). Heidegger (1984a) calls this process a "gathering" of light:

The lighting not only illuminates what is present, but gathers it together and secures it in advance in presencing... We are too quick to believe that the mystery of what is to be thought always lies distant and deeply hidden under a hardly penetrable layer of strangeness. On the contrary, it has its essential abode in what is near by, which approaches what is coming into presence and preserves what has drawn near... Presumably the mystery that beckons in what is to be thought is nothing other than essentially what we have attempted to suggest in the name "lighting." Everyday opinion, therefore, self-assuredly and stubbornly bypasses the mystery. (pp. 120-121)

For Heidegger, this gathering “secured” what *Dasein* finds in the realm of light, because gathering actively keeps the Other present and fully lifted forward (instead of falling into the ordinary interactions of everyday communication). The word “gather” is also curious here, because I do not usually think of light as something that is “gathered” in the strictest sense. But this light is about experience, knowledge gained from that experience, and my research into the lived nature of religious conversion and intensification is very much a “gathering” of light in the form of words.

But what is “gathering?” How is it to be understood? The words *logos* and *legein* are closely related, but have meanings that appear unrelated on the surface. *Logos* is literally Greek for “word,” but its cousin *legein* means “to gather, choose, and recount.” It would seem that my research process is aptly understood as *logos legein*, a gathering of words, carefully chosen to recount the tale elsewhere. Simply put, in knowing others, I more deeply know myself.

In keeping with the spirit of a *logos legein* phenomenological process, I choose to linger in the mystery Heidegger describes above by echoing Shikibu’s poetic insight into the nature of Being. To do so, I offer a poem of my own, using a mixture of my own words and the words I have gathered from my participants. The light of their religious experience shines through me now and illuminates those beliefs, boundaries, and changes that I thought existed outside of myself. Now I clearly see the story of my own religious conversion is reflected in their stories as well. I indent their words, but embrace them all as reflective my own light.

I Gather My Voice Among a Chorus

Devout isolation

Mormon church offers you that image:

Family home evening, structure, the definitive knowing.
 Everyone makes it look so easy
 Pray that much harder, leave no trace
 I was envious of that special place. (Mary)
 Work hard to fit: quiet sexless straight White
 Sprinkle down the house,
 Pray to whatever patron saint. (Art)
 Hard to see the horizon
 When you're in the tunnel. (Mary)

Lingering doubt

Left out, left cold, leaves you wondering
 Throw me a bone, won't you?
 A little flexibility goes a long way
 I always wanted meaning and understanding.
 (Karen)
 Caught in an untenable place
 Sinister doubts murmur in my ear
 It just comes down to evidence.
 I need evidence. (Ben)
 Dexter testimonies performed for the congregation
 I really wanted to believe. (Henrike)
 Why the performance?
 I was battling my church. I realized the
 Teachings were good, but the people weren't.
 (Juanita)

Leaving Home

Suffocating, what for? It isn't safe anymore
 You walk out that door, No idea what's in store
 There is something out there,
 But I don't know what it is. (Juanita)
 Theology not fair? Aggressive response, I don't care
 Intrusive in my business? Who has the right to quiz this?

Religious Wandering

Old time religion, Way older than Jesus or sin
 Taste just a smidgeon, Working hard to ease us... in
 "People are courted to be involved." (Karen)
 Feel like a frog in a lukewarm pan

A Home With No Official Name

Pagan, Buddhist, Agnostic, Spiritualist
 Sigh. Parents go their own way
 Mormon in my shadow
 Dad, you know, I still believe in God. (Mujahid)

Catholic at Christmas

My mother said it. She wouldn't lie to me.

(Mujahid)

What does present and future mean without past?

Can't escape who I was, because it's who I am

Learn to appreciate what really matters

The words of the prophet became the religion as

Opposed to the experience of the prophet. (Wolf)

Even so, I'll sit with Buddha in the morning

At least He knows when to keep quiet

Among Others

Just reveal a new religion

See what happens

Must I convert to yours? (Juanita)

Some Christians call that blasphemy.

Well, they can keep calling it blasphemy.

But you know what, it changed my life. (Theresa)

Lots to say

Keep it at bay

Stay out of the fray

Regrets along the way

I would've had a better understanding of the family.

I would have reached out more. (Juanita)

No person can make another person happy.

You know it's just not possible. (Wolf)

This world doesn't belong to me, I have to share it.

Is it any wonder that forgiveness is such a powerful

Tool in both our transformation and that of others?

(Mary)

Certainty

Truth, obvious and elusive

I think life is mostly in the gray. (Karen)

Purpose, given and built

It's best to be left with undefined. (Art)

Knowledge, empirical and transcendent

Then as I got older, I understood it. And now that

I'm old, I don't understand it anymore. (Wolf)

God, personal and silent

Whatever works, because I don't know what the

Truth is to that. As long as I respect that there is a

Higher being, whichever son, father, something.

(Art)

me, infinitesimal and universal

If I'm being really honest, I'm kind of envious of the

Ease that they sort of walk through the world in.
 I just don't feel like I experience that sense of ease.
 (Henrike)

Now, ain't *that* the truth? Can I get an *amen*?

Unfinished

Hard to talk about religion now-a-days
 The identity is complicated, but the talk is not
 The great Jihad is Jihad against Self. (Mujahid)
 Hmmm.
 Wisdom from ancient scripture
 Maybe I'm a Muslim...

All of the experiences I describe above are contained in the rendering of insights that follow. In this sense, my participants and I have certainly engaged in earnest and this process has left me, as well as them, transformed in the experience. Having been drawn into that process by the “recollections” of the previous chapter, I share my “understandings” of the phenomenon below.

Naming Religion: What is Religious Identity?

If I have learned anything from the stories of my participants, it is that stories of religious conversion and intensification imply that religious identity is far more complicated than traditional notions of single or separated structures of identity. What can this research add to current understandings of identity in socio-cultural foundations of education? Is there something to be said about the way this identity is treated, considered, and used when drawing inference for other social phenomena related to identity?

I believe that this research complements, and occasionally challenges, the existing and unfolding discourses on prejudice reduction, simplistic and anti-intellectual theology, identity politics and intersectional approaches to the wholeness of a human being (particularly the emphasis on reconsidering identity formation as a two-dimensional model). My aim here is to rename identity from the ground up through a process that

captures the wholeness *and* movement of identity in the way that a poem captures the most complex of experiences and brings its truths forward.

In what follows, I seek to create new and open discourse between phenomenology and other disciplines that engage in the work of identity development, particularly the kind of engagement that Eddy (2008) brings to bear as a challenge to student development theory in the field of education:

And so I choose to irritate theory that needs to be troubled, as well as the ways in which theory is applied, and possibly over relied upon to explain individuals and their experiences. (p. 266)

Thus, in that same vein, I explore below one of the seminal scientific, empirical paradigms that currently dominates the collective understanding of religious identity and “irritate” its various assumptions with new insights gleaned through the experiences of religious conversion and intensification narratives. In particular, I challenge the very notion that religious identity can be understood as a fixed identity, opting instead to center the experiences of those who have moved through and across its boundaries. In doing so, I develop a new consciousness of a *queer* religious identity.

Inheriting the Concreteness of Religious Identity

Part of my interest in a study of religious identity stems from the connection many researchers have made over the past 60 years between religious identity and prejudice reduction (and my own anecdotal experiences facilitating intergroup dialogue or diversity trainings while working in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion [ODI] for 14 years) that I discuss below. I begin a conversation about the insights surrounding religious conversion with these studies, because they are bodies of literature from which this research springs forward in conversation. Without the foundation of this prior research, I would not have

an opportunity to respond (even if in disagreement with some of the assumptions). Thus, I critique the effects of these studies, but recognize and respect the intention of these scholars in serving the broader goal of prejudice elimination, *which I share*. Indeed, this work is intended as a good faith effort at further engagement in the crucial scholarship they have developed ever since.

In attempting to study the formation of prejudice, entire bodies of literature have often taken the *prior* variable, religious identity, as a relatively flat, neatly-contained, and self-disclosed given on a questionnaire. My own participants, however, suggest that this overall sense of flatness is not natural or given, but something that is handed to them, early on, as a *naturalized* view of the world. Regimentation, obligation, and repetition create the perception that religious identity is a fixed set of social expectations and the corresponding behavior is quiescence to those expectations:

I was just doing what I was basically told or what I had heard. (Ben)

I think the Jewish side of what I was exposed to was much more a kind of historical/cultural type of thing. (Karen)

Everything I got out of religion up to, I would say, age seven, is from my mother, primarily from my mother. (Juanita)

As I was growing up, it seemed like it was just so many rules... I took face value of what I was taught. (Theresa)

I realized that most of the pain that I was experiencing was self-inflicted. Rules. Ways of behaving. (Wolf)

And when taken as a given, religious identity becomes reified as something that can simply be checked in a box on a survey. My own research suggests something else entirely about religious identity, though I also strive to reach similar research goals

concerned with social justice such as prejudice reduction. Fundamentally, however, I do not want to draw conclusions (or even insights) from assumptions about religious identity that are, in my interpretation of the data, too circumscribed and unexamined. Data from the lived experiences of religious conversion and intensification disrupt the assumption of stability at its core.

Specifically, much of the current and widely accepted psycho-social understandings about religious identity begins with the seminal and foundational research of Allport (1950) and Allport and Ross (1967). These researchers usher in the scientific discourse into, and investigation of, religious identity by attempting to draw causal relationships between self-identified religious identity (as derived by attending a particular Christian church) and prejudice reduction against non-dominant social groups.²¹ In this study, they were attempting to determine whether *qualitative* differences within Christian religious identity (which they simply and universally labeled “religious identity”) could help explain why some Christians exhibited prejudice and others did not. The important part of their study to which I draw attention is two-fold. First, their sample only included adults from five states and six Christian denominations as described below:

While our sample of six groups of churchgoers shows some diversity of denomination and region, *it is in no sense representative*. Graduate-student members of a seminar collected the 309 cases from the following church groups:

²¹ Much of the research on the social impact of religious identity comes at a time (post-World War II through the Civil Rights era) when two *seemingly* dissimilar popular discourses around religion in the United States are operating. One discourse is a general religious sentiment about what it means to be a “good” American. The other is its opposite (and arguably could be two sides of the same coin) and suggests that those viewed as “other,” particularly around race, are justifiably reviled and not worthy of religious charity. Thus, Allport and Ross were seeking to make Christian prejudice more visible and understandable. I applaud that effort.

Group A, 94 Roman Catholic (Massachusetts); Group B, 55 Lutheran (New York State); Group C, 44 Nazarene (South Carolina); Group D, 53 Presbyterian (Pennsylvania); Group E, 35 Methodist (Tennessee); Group F, Baptist (Massachusetts). We labeled the groups alphabetically since *such small subsamples could not possibly lead to valid generalizations* concerning denominations as a whole. [emphasis added] (p. 436)

Second, the instrument itself precluded the participation of anyone who was not White and Christian. “The scale... is a subtly worded instrument containing 12 anti-Negro, 11 anti-Jewish, and 10 anti-other items (pertaining to Orientals, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans)” (p. 436). The important point is not so much what Allport and Ross found (because they did make significant ongoing findings). Rather, it was the lack of discussion about *how all* religious identity comes to be defined (from a culled data set of a single religious identity) that inadvertently begins to naturalize religious identity in their research and the research that builds upon it. Additionally, this research, though it says otherwise above, provides the possibility for psycho-social researchers to invisibly frame religious identity as something from which broad conclusions can, and should, be drawn. What might the current conversation around religious identity look like had they engaged with a different perspective (religious, academic, or philosophical)? How might their research have been different if they had engaged the narratives of those who had gone through religious conversion and intensification?

I didn't think that I wasn't identifying with being a Christian, I just thought that the Christian people weren't identified as being who they say they were. (Theresa)

So we all have these stories that we tell ourselves over and over again that sort of mask who we really are. ... We basically, for the most part, tow that line of doing what society – what we think, not even what society tells us to do. But what we think society thinks we should do. (Wolf)

Theresa and Wolf could have just as easily been in the congregations of this study, but their narratives reveal a self-awareness that deep/inner identity and “check-the-box” identity can be radically different *and* that the veneer of religious identity can be a mask through which people yield socially acceptable answers to uncomfortable questions. Could the concept of Being enhance this research? I believe it can. Though this initial study of religious identity purports to not represent religious identity overall, subsequent research (like that described below) takes these simplified religious identities as given thereafter.

Phenomenology’s response to oversimplification. At the time that religious identity was initially being studied, developed, and reified, psycho-social research like that of Allport and Ross (1967) had the benefit of being contemporary with Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1962). Though a discourse between psychology, sociology, and phenomenology would have been possible, I suspect there was little interaction across those academic disciplines. Yet, I cannot help but wonder what it would have been like had Allport, Ross, and Heidegger discussed *together* the lived experiences of my own research participants:

It’s complicated, because it’s — in some ways, it was also a social expectation, right, so that if you were Protestant — I mean, I don’t know of anyone who said, “Oh, I don’t wanna” — you know, was baptized and then as a Protestant, who said, “I don’t wanna get confirmed.” So it would’ve been a real big step to say... “No thanks.”
(Henrike)

I was in a crossroad of where, what do I do? How do I do this and not hurt my mom and then not hurt my dad, but then do the right thing that I felt was right and not faking the people out. (Junior)

I wasn't feeling like as motivated, but it had this like momentum and this trajectory that I couldn't get off of it. And then I ended up getting baptized, and it was like the day after. (Karen)

What was the classic Christian pep talk thing? God loves you as you are, that's what it was. So the idea that you have to perform for everybody around you, but that God loves you exactly the way you are. (Mary)

I choose selections from Henrike, Karen, Mary, and Junior because each of them identified as Christian (Lutheran, Mormon, Evangelical, Pentecostal/Baptist, respectively) during their young adulthood (and two currently maintain a strong Christian connection). It is conceivable that any of them potentially could have been in the congregations studied by Allport and Ross (and their research progeny). Yet their indication of being "Christian" is not strictly, and more importantly, *causally* associated with the inculcation of theological belief as Allport and Ross suggest. Instead, they reveal *interwoven* and *incentivized* pressures, beliefs, and relationships that also have an equal hand in dictating what it meant to be self-identified as a Christian. At its core, there appears to be no singular motivation or purpose around their own senses of authenticity in their identification with the Christian label.

And how would Heidegger have contributed to the examination and interpretation of these texts of lived experience? I suspect that he would have initiated a conversation with his colleagues in psychology with his work on identity via his concept of Falling (*verfallen*) in *Being and Time*. *Verfallen* is a term Heidegger uses to convey a sense that *Dasein* is not constantly aware of the fullness or depth of its own state of Being relative to the world and others in it. Instead, Being "falls" into a state of myopic awareness of

itself and chooses to focus instead on a myriad of other objects and Beings of *Dasein*'s world. Heidegger says:

There is revealed a basic kind of Being which belongs to everydayness; we call this the “falling” of *Dasein*. This term does not express any negative evaluation, but is used to signify that *Dasein* is proximally and for the most part alongside the ‘world’ of its concern. This “absorption in...” [*Aufgehen bei...*] has mostly the character of Being-lost in the publicness of the “they”... “Fallenness” into the ‘world’ means an absorption in Being-with-one-another, in so far as the latter is guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. Through the Interpretation of falling, what we have called the “inauthenticity” of *Dasein* may be defined... [as] a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world—the kind of being which is completely fascinated by the ‘world’ and by the *Dasein*-with of Others in the “they.” (pp. 219-220)

In this excerpt, Heidegger is describing a state of consciousness that complicates the collection or analysis of information on identity, because *Dasein* is not always able to fully articulate its own deepest understandings of its own identity in the first place, due to the competing (and distracting) stimulus of the surrounding world of which it is inextricably a part. In its “fallen state,” *Dasein* is outwardly absorbed with “the Others” (in much the way that prejudice, for example, operates). Moreover, Heidegger says that this state of Being is inauthentic and unrepresentative of a deeper *Dasein* or Being. Translated into terms of prejudice and religious identity, this means that collecting data on how someone relates to an Other in “publicness of the they,” is necessarily not collecting information on *Dasein*'s actual identity or Being, but rather on *Dasein*'s fallen or shadow state. It is for precisely this reason, that conversion narratives are more useful for exploring identity, because there is an enhanced level of self-awareness through the exploration and intentionality that takes place within the consciousness of my participants that shakes them out of the *verfallen* state they see around them. In short, Heidegger

would suggest (and I would concur) to his colleagues that they had collected *surface* information *performing identity* that did not actually yield the necessary information to describe a more *authentic*, robust, and perhaps contradictory, identity.

This Heideggerian critique diagnoses the flaw in the work of Allport and Ross, but leaves the methodological solution to be resolved elsewhere. I submit that Heidegger would likely have borrowed a solution from a prior scholar in religious experience akin to his own philosophy. Mircea Eliade (1959) provides a possibility for psycho-social and phenomenological cooperation in his own assessment of how religious life and understanding come about:

For the modern world, religion as a form of life and *Weltanschauung* is represented by Christianity. By making a considerable effort, a Western intellectual has at most some chance of familiarizing himself with the religious vision of classical antiquity and even with certain great oriental religions—for example, Hinduism or Confucianism. But such an effort to broaden his [sic] religious horizon, praiseworthy though it may be, does not take him [sic] far enough... To become familiar with some oriental or classical mythologist and theologies does not yet suffice for a comprehension of the mental universe of *homo religiousus*... *There is no other way of understanding a foreign mental universe than to place oneself inside it, at its very center, in order to progress from there to all the values that it possesses.* [emphasis added] (pp. 162-165)

In this quote, Eliade strongly suggests that research inquiries into the religious motivations of “*homo religiousus*” require a leap away from *a priori* theorizing (which Eliade calls becoming “familiar with some oriental or classical mythologist and theologies”) in favor of an engaged approach where the researcher and the researched close their distance entirely (as in “to place oneself inside it”). It is not to say that Allport and Ross could not have asked similar questions that they chose to ask in their survey

questionnaire. Rather, it is the *distance* that they maintained from their research subjects that created the circumstances whereby they were no longer able to see nuance in the relationship between identity and prejudice. That distance made it possible to see prejudice as coming from two, and only two, “reasonable” streams of experience: intrinsic motivation or extrinsic pressure.

Further and more narrow reification of identity. Alas, the imagined conversation among those scholars did not take place, except in my imagination. The consequences, however, are not imaginary. By ignoring the contribution of phenomenology, the research started by Allport (1950) and Allport and Ross (1967) became a *compounded* error across time with continued myopia around the way to treat and understand identity. Twenty years later, the approach to identity actually becomes narrower, because it now tightly focuses the criteria for data collection to undergraduate students whereas it had previously collected data from all church members in different congregations without regard to educational exclusivity. As an example, Herek (1987) chose to create more geographic diversity by moving out west in data collection, but allowed no other dimension of diversity to be present. In addition, the instrument was exclusive in its assumption about who people were, because it was a modified version of the one used in the Allport and Ross (1967) study. Herek stressed the following as methodology for the study:

Questionnaires were distributed by instructors during class sessions to students at four universities. Because anti-black racism and attitudes towards homosexual persons are conceptualized here as intergroup attitudes, respondents were included in the analysis only if they reported that they were white (non-Hispanic) and that they had engaged exclusively in heterosexual behaviors since age 16... This left a total sample of 126 respondents: 56 from the

University of California at Davis (22 males and 34 females), 18 from California State University at Chico (5 males and 13 females), 36 from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (13 males and 23 females), and 16 from the University of Massachusetts at Boston (6 males and 10 females). (p. 36)

Again, Herek reproduces the original philosophy to exclude diversity based on race and sexuality. If their findings were limited to this group, that would be fine. Yet, these studies generalize to broad human populations about what identity looks like and how it behaves. And ten years after Herek's study (and 30 years after Allport and Ross), Fulton (1997) conducts a similar study using similar data criteria:

Two hundred fifty-seven undergraduate students at a Christian liberal arts college in Northern California were recruited as subjects to the study... Because several of the dependent variables in this study related to negative attitudes towards blacks and homosexuals, respondents were included in analysis only if they indicated that they were white and heterosexual. Seventy-one questionnaires were excluded from the sample because they were from either non-white or non-heterosexual subjects, leaving 176 usable questionnaires. Subjects ranged in age from 18-24 (average =18.5), and in college experience from 0 to 3 years (average 1.5). There were 110 females and 66 male subjects. (p. 5)

Yet, I commend Fulton's work, because this study reveals that the data are beginning to rebel. Regarding identity (something that these research projects do *not* intend to study directly *per se*), Fulton finds the following: "What is striking about the descriptions of the religious orientations is the remarkable echo several have in descriptions of identity statuses" (p. 3). Clearly, Fulton notices the impact of collecting data in this fashion, because these data continue to produce the "echo" of the work heralding all the way back to Allport and Ross. Tellingly, Fulton reveals that this constant narrowing of the data collection pool has additional consequences (beyond identity) in the primary purpose of

their collective research projects (prejudice reduction) undertaken with this analytical approach. “The hypotheses concerning the relationship of the identity statuses to the two prejudice scales were less consistently supported” (p. 9). Without trying to sound alarmist, it appears that this research stream is beginning to experience the collapsing “fatal strategy” to which Baudrillard says is the “fate” of the modern enterprise.

However, it gives me hope that Fulton’s warning to future psycho-social research has not gone completely unheeded. Johnson, Rowatt and LeBouff (2010) sought to conduct further refinement of the Allport and Ross (1967) model and actually *expanded* access into their data set based on race (while simultaneously, and unfortunately, limiting their sample size further and retaining a slice of the population based on undergraduate students):

A total of 43 college students (26 women, 16 men, 1 unspecified gender, M=18.88 years) were recruited from introductory psychology courses. This sample was somewhat diverse with regard to ethnicity (26 Whites, 8 Hispanics, 5 African Americans, 3 missing values, and 1 Asian or Pacific Islander) but less diverse with regard to religion (28 Protestant, 11 Catholic, 1 Muslim, 1 “none,” and 2 missing values). (p. 122)

I draw out this genealogy of research not to labor the point, but to demonstrate clearly how religious identity *in itself* has become totally naturalized in the field as solid, static, and empirically measurable *though the research stream never aimed to do so with intention*.

Dawning self-awareness of the problem. To their credit, scientists of this kind of research are hearing the phenomenological resistance that the data present (though they do not use that specific language themselves). Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) begin this conversation among their colleagues (giving me hope about the

possibilities of extra-silo inclinations in the academy) by questioning the continued use of persons living in W.E.I.R.D. societies (where W.E.I.R.D. is a tongue-in-cheek acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) as their primary source of data pools. The critique is a re-telling of Heidegger's *verfallen* argument described above in that the researchers are *themselves* in *verfallen* state as they continue to collect information from a narrow subset of humanity and apply those inferences to all people without regard to the larger sense of Being to which it does violence. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan state:

Sampling from a thin slice of humanity would be less problematic if researchers confined their interpretations to the populations from which they sampled. However, *despite their narrow samples, behavioral scientists often are interested in drawing inferences about the human mind and human behavior.* This inferential step is rarely challenged or defended... The lack of epistemic vigilance underscores the *prevalent, though implicit, assumptions* that the findings one derives from a particular sample will generalize broadly; one adult human sample is pretty much the same as the next... In psychology, much of this generalization is implicit. A typical article does not claim to be discussing “humans” but will rather simply describe a decision bias, psychological process, set of correlations, and so on, without addressing issues of generalizability, although findings are often linked to “people.” [emphasis added] (p. 63)

The significance of this self-reflective critique within the discipline of psychology cannot be understated. Though they do not engage in phenomenological discourse, they have arrived at it through their own methods and ways of knowing. From my vantage point as a phenomenologist, it appears that a window of opportunity to create cross-disciplinary engagement on the way identity is constructed and reified in the social sciences is upon us. Perhaps an initial good-faith call can come from David Michael

Levin (1988) as he seeks to convey one of Heidegger's (1979) deepest insights into the nature of *Dasein*: the inherent wholeness of identity that presents itself as existing within the polar continuum of subject and object. I am particularly fond of Levin's account below:

I would like to set before our eyes some words that Heidegger repeated at the close of the *Heraclitus Seminar*. These words, from Periander of Corinth: *In care, take the whole as whole*. In caring for the whole and taking it to heart, we take good care of ourselves. Giving up the object, giving up the subject, vision opens, and we begin to *see* with care for the whole. [emphasis in original] (Heidegger, p. 162; Levin, pp. 414-415)

Levin's desire to see the "whole as whole" is in ontological and epistemological alignment with Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan's approach to sampling that is careful and qualified. Indeed, in seeing the whole, we are much more able to see the parts that masquerade as the whole itself.

The instability of religious identity. When relaxing my analytic vision as I gaze upon the religious identities of my participants, I find that the fundamental irritation to theories of religious identity returns to the source of that irritation, those conversion narratives of real persons who resist being *overly* reduced in research. Campbell and Moyers (1988) prepare me for the reality that these participants may not yield identity meta-narratives that are logical, sequential, and perfectly coherent from which to generalize. They say: "These heroes of religion came back with the wonder of God, not with the blueprint of God" (p. 141). Below are several examples of the ways that my participants speak to the need they feel to be treated wholly and in connection with other parts of their Being (with all of the messy instability they imply):

So the counter to [dissonance] wasn't a rejection of the values that were attached to Christianity, Islam or Judaism, but to replace it with an – with imperatives that didn't come from a deity but came from the need for humanity. (Art)

Atheism is only one belief. If I came to believe that any sort of deity existed, that alone would not change my larger perspective or approach. It would change my identity, of course. (Ben)

I know so many people that everything has to be black and white and in little neat boxes and I'm not like that. (Karen)

And so began my living with a foot in each world - although it is more like my feet in the gentile and sometimes Christian world while my mind is squarely in the Jewish world. (Mary)

Another thing that Islam did for many of us, it gave us [African Americans] a means to look beyond blackness into the international human perspective, the universal human personality. (Mujahid)

Most of the people [in her church] don't know I'm an evangelist. I'm just Theresa. That's all I am. It was a title that I was given when I was there ministering. (Theresa)

Art's primary concern is to be understood as someone who can simultaneously hold multiple complexities (religious values *and* humanistic imperatives) within his own sense of religious identity. Ben bristles at the very idea that his religious identity (and the label that surrounds him) somehow has complete causal connection to other beliefs he has to hold. When he suggests that his identity would change, he speaks not of his broader Being, but the short-hand label he already chooses to minimize. Karen and Mary both clearly and unequivocally state that their authentic/deep religious identities cannot be captured on a form or questionnaire and need to be understood in the context of their own experiences. And Mujahid and Theresa, both African-American participants, articulate the *seemingly* contradictory, though perfectly understandable, yearning of

having their religious identities not be parsed out from their necessary and vital membership in a racial group, as well as the desire to be understood as an individual nonetheless. Said another way, my participants experience their religious identity as having a point beyond which they are not reducible, but rather are expanding and complex.

Each of the above narratives point to a deeper wholeness on which Levin, Heidegger, and Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan can agree: research into identity necessitates some level of reduction of the person (because all research is representation), but identity, in general, (and I would suggest, religious identity, in particular) can only be reduced so far before it no longer looks recognizable to those from whom the data are collected. To find that “sweet spot” where religious identity has enough “firmness” for research, capturing “wholeness” of identity means creating sufficient room in our research paradigms for religious identity to be a fundamentally unstable variable.

But I do not fear instability, and truthfully, I relish in it. Fortunately for me, other scholars have leaned into complexity and instability, rather than leaning away. Another body of literature, Queer Theory, has broadly articulated many of the terms of instability I describe above. Hence, I borrow the term advisedly to explore new possibilities for religious identity that conversion and intensification narratives imply must exist.²²

²² I borrow the word “queer” advisedly, for two reasons. First, this body of theory has its origins in the resistance lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have had to mount in the face of normalizing religious oppression. Thus, the fact that I am using a term designed to free same-sex desire from religious stigmatizing for the purpose of disrupting the oppressive discourse surrounding religious identity is ironic (and not lost on me). In fact, there is something poetic about this irony. Second, the term “queer,” as it is used among LGBT people has a paradox embedded within it. While “queer” has been developed as an act of language appropriation to disrupt the very idea of terms like

Seidman (1996) speaks of the instability of identity that is captured through what it means to be “queer:”

Identity constructs are necessarily unstable since they elicit opposition or resistance by people whose experiences or interests are submerged by a particular assertion of identity... Rather than viewing the affirmation of identity as necessarily liberating, Queer theorists view them as, in part, disciplinary and regulatory structures. *Identity constructions function as templates defining selves and behaviors and therefore excluding a range of possible ways to frame the self, body, desires, actions, and social relations.* Approaching identities as multiple, unstable, and regulatory may suggest to critics that undermining of gay theory and politics, but, for Queer theorists, it presents new and productive possibilities... The aim is not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and contestable as to its meaning and political role. [emphasis added] (p. 12)

Seidman’s description of “queer” is particularly revealing in how it can inform a phenomenological approach to identity overall, because it resists the theoretical reification that social sciences force *upon* it. In particular, I am drawn to the phenomenological nuances that queer opens up for those who experience religious conversion and intensification; namely, “the possible ways to frame the self, body, desires, actions, and social relations” of those who have undergone this experience from within their own location as opposed to without. What is it about queer location that provides insight? Can queer also be a state of mind in addition to an embodied stance?

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender as being a singular community, its appropriation necessarily assumes a single community to undertake that appropriation (as evidenced by its ubiquitous use in academia, despite discomfort this term produces among older LGBT individuals who continue to hear negativity in the term). In using “queer” to name religious identity, I make no such claim to “community” in either direction, focusing instead on the positionality the word implies and the corresponding perspective it reveals in this research.

From my vantage point, I see a great deal of theoretical and lived synchronicity between the assertions of sexual queerness and the queerness of religious conversion and identity (as experienced through conversion, intensification, and complex movement).

Queer Religion: Poetizing the Ambiguity of Religious Identity

In putting forth the notion of queer religious identity, I necessarily create psychic space designed to foster and promote discomfort and resistance to the narrowing and incentivized constraints around one's own sense of religious freedom. In that blurred space, ambiguity reigns supreme without regard to the very disruption it causes. What does the religious conversion and intensification experience of my participants, ten spiritual edgewalkers, say about religious identity? And what does the corresponding effect on religious identity say about identity overall? Ambiguity appears to be a fundamental existential instability leaving me to wonder: Is identity understood more like marsh instead of land? In either sense, how should I treat or understand this ambiguity from the perspective of phenomenology? Heidegger (1962) has a downright positive and optimistic take on a state of Being many would otherwise find uncomfortable and unsettling:

Ambiguity not only affects the way we avail ourselves of what is accessible for use and enjoyment, and the way we manage it; ambiguity has already established itself in the understanding as a potentiality-for-Being, and in the way *Dasein* projects itself and presents itself with possibilities.
(p. 217)

Ah, now the connection between queerness and phenomenology becomes obvious in the peculiar word “possibilities” that is used by both Heidegger and Seidman above. It would seem that the bountiful yield of ambiguity/queerness is that future possibilities are open with potentiality and *freedom*, and that in turn, form a new relationship with Being that

did not exist before. In fact, the words of my participants pointedly suggest the fecundity of ambiguity as a freedom and joy experienced in the queerness of conversion.

I just think for a moment, about there's more rejoicing in heaven for the one sheep that comes back than for the whole flock that remains behind... But the freedom that you talk about to go out and find yourself. In a spiritual way you have returned to the source of what it's all about. You know. The flock could fall off a cliff tomorrow. (Art)

It feels freeing, liberating. You don't have to look a certain way. You don't have to dress a certain way. You don't have to be interested in certain things. There's just much more space to really be who you are. It's almost like you have permission to be who you are and inspiration. (Karen)

I found that to be freeing. I thought now I can be – if there is no god, I can choose my own path. So I can be the person that I want to be, whoever that person is, and I saw that as a positive thing. (Mary)

[Dr. Howard Thurman's] prayer was "Oh God, bless me to be free and endure the burdens of freedom and the aloneness of those without chains."...And I found myself – as a Christian mystic, I found myself as a Muslim, drawing on that a great deal, because sometimes I'll see the group in the chains, and we all have a tendency to wanna be a part of, but, no, not at the price of putting the chains on, I won't. I just won't do it. (Mujahid)

It changed my life. And guess what, I will never – after I found that freedom and he said, whom the son set free is free indeed, I would never allow anybody to put me back in bondage. (Theresa)

Freedom for me came when I realized that most of the pain that I was experiencing [prior to the conversion] was self-inflicted. Rules. Ways of behaving. On my spirit map it says a quote from my mother. "Don't be yourself. Be better." Don't be yourself. Don't be who you are. Be better. And the better is something that you get from outside. From books, from what people tell you. (Wolf)

I begin with freedom, because I do not want to initially frame queer as pathological. Instead, I emphasize the opposite. In soliciting this term, what are those queer religious experiences that certainly contain within them positive accounts that are often missed by those who do not see from that angle? The words of my participants suggest that this freedom is derived from a purposely-unmoored positionality that is often misunderstood relative to a centralized (and privileged) norm. Without a doubt, “queer” demands an exacting price for the freedom it gives, but a balanced approach to this term yields a broader and more perfect image of those possibilities that Heidegger and Seidman insist are there. In what follows, I leap into the mystery of queerness to develop a complementary lens through which the phenomenological insights and pedagogical implications of religious conversion and intensification can be clearly seen. Specifically, I explore the Being-nature of queer, followed by existential positionalities that religious conversion and intensification imply.

Queer: A word of disruption and disorientation. Queer vexes. And it certainly vexes me. It is a term that I have heard in my own past, and I scrutinize it now with the same trepidation one might have when seeking to pick up broken glass. Queer is sharp, cutting both ways, for that careless someone who chooses to handle it without the right approach. Even the sound of queer elicits a tone of opposition as illustrated by that horrible elementary schoolyard game called “Smear the Queer.” It involves chasing someone (in my experience almost always a boy who was perceived to be “different”) and attempting to “smear” him physically with accompanying (rhyming) words such as jeer, leer or sneer. Its aftermath is also a jumble of words that rhyme: fear, tear, veer, and (sigh) disappear. Indeed, queer vexes. But why must it be so? What is it about queerness

that leaves a profound sense of disruption and disorientation? And if religious conversion or intensification is a queer experience, what then? Can I uncover the positive in that religiously queer experience that is often overshadowed by a pall of negativity?

The etymology of the word “queer” is quite neutral in tone, despite the way the word has evolved over time. “Queer” comes from the Germanic *quer*, and has adjective, noun and verb meanings. As a noun, queer means an ontological state of Being connected to how something is built: “cross, oblique” or whether an object simply exists as a “puzzle.” It also has verb meanings where one has “to squint,” or “quiz” something. In both its noun and verb forms, the tone is very neutral, relating to something that deviates from a particular norm or attempting to understand that deviation. It is only in the adjective etymological form where one sees its now-negative interpretation. “Queer” modifies and names other nouns as “perverse.” Yet, when looking into the etymology of “perverse,” the connection with queer and religious conversion is easily seen as inextricably linked. “Perverse” (and the related word “pervert”) come from the Latin words *perversus* and *pervertere*, meaning to “turn round or the wrong way.” Curiously, this meaning and etymology is closely connected to the very meaning of conversion (*con+vertere*, meaning “to turn”) that I describe earlier where *perverted* is understood as “an analogical formation after *convert*.” With this sequenced etymology, it appears that when one converts, one then can become (or is described as) perverted or queer, a curious and not-so-subtle disincentive to religiously convert.

And lest it remain invisible, I sense that the use of phenomenology in the exploration of religious queerness is itself a queer journey. Though her study is specific to sexual orientation, Ahmed (2006) claims phenomenology as justly appropriate to

explore queer issues, because it contains within it a stance oriented to that which is different, particular, and (above all) disruptive to preconceived notions. I am proud to claim those links to phenomenology as Ahmed does:

To queer phenomenology is also to offer a queer phenomenology. In other words, queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that which it comes into contact. A queer phenomenology might find what is queer within phenomenology and use that queerness to make some rather different points. After all, phenomenology is full of queer moments as moments of disorientation. (p. 4)

I see that embedded within Ahmed's vision of a queer phenomenology is a philosophical approach to difference and identity that does not examine marginalization from a safe, objective center, but reaches for the margins as a logical extension of its own ethos and sense of *unheimlich*. By describing phenomenological exploration as queer, I am fully satisfied that it is part and parcel to the insight into queer religious experience and fully lifts the voices of those who experience this phenomenon.

A new center: Standing between binaries. Queer etymology also reveals a positional and embodied power embedded in the term, because it simultaneously creates a unique standpoint from which to observe the center of any relationship, particularly as it highlights an imbalance of power from center to margin. An example of queerness (that is used outside of the context of sexuality or religion) comes from the narrative of a self-described *racial* queer. Chang-Ross (2010) opts to use the term queer to describe her lived experience as a multi-racial person where her racial positionality contains the intertwined positive and negative meanings of queer:

Queerness, then, for the Multiracial individual, may denote both deviance (from the monoracial norm) and a unique individuality (stemming from one's Multiracial background). My experiences spoke to this notion—I am

both deviant and curiously anomalous. [emphasis added]
(p. 111)

Chang-Ross' lived experience is about the issue of race, but she is also clearly capturing how racial queerness follows the parameters of the etymology described above. Racial queerness contains within it the more obvious negative meaning of "perverse" as well as the other meanings implying how something is seen or understood as neutrally different (e.g., "curiously anomalous") or even positive (e.g., "unique individuality"). Following the example of Chang-Ross, I mean to suggest that religious conversion and intensification contains *all* of these various queer meanings in much the same way as sexual or racial queerness.

Yet, in addition, Chang-Ross adds one crucial component not contained within the root meaning of queer that I believe is also mirrored in religious conversion and intensification. Specifically, she also uses the term to describe a sense that her racial identity contains multiple realities, past experiences and social labels in a unified and hybridized whole. Perhaps the best religious example of this hybridized reality is my participant, Mary. Because of her various motivations around religious identity (from staying married to her Christian husband, social expectations of friends, and her love of Judaism with its corresponding support from Rabbis who provide her religious instruction), Mary foresees a life where she will forever experience her religious identity as between Christianity and Judaism as her *ontological* Being. But she also makes the pragmatic choice of using the Christian label to describe her surface-level, *ontic* Being. Yet, this is not a sad reality for her. Mary finds language for herself to describe this state of Being where she can find community across time and in the historicized context of Judaism *and* Christianity. She says:

I have my feet in so many different worlds now... There was a class [in Jewish Studies] that [studied] what was happening during the Second Temple period and during the Roman conquest of Israel, that [looked] at tombstones. So they find tombstones with the expression "god-fearer" on them, and that a god-fearer was a person who was not Jewish but participated in Jewish events, gave to the synagogue... There are references to god-fearers in the New Testament, and the centurion comes to mind that had wanted his servant healed, so he goes to Jesus... Yes, on the outside he's Roman and we know he's not Jewish, but there's some kind of participation... even if he can't quite convert, and that's where I find myself, so I appreciate that term... A god-fearer. (Mary)

I am particularly drawn to the first sentence of this quote: "I have my feet in so many different worlds now." Though Mary might check "Christian" on a survey, her lived reality is captured in the embodied metaphor of having her "feet" in multiple realities, connected and made coherent by the unity of her body. To name this unity, she appropriates the term "god-fearer" for herself, and finds herself in a unique position from which to see and engage both Christianity and Judaism.

Chang-Ross and my participant, Mary, are both examples of a modern-day Tiresius (whose Greek legend describes "him" as having been both a man and a woman) in that they are floating in the ambiguous in-between of identity binaries. Loraux (2005) provides details of how Tiresius' in-between standpoint is powerful enough (through its own uniqueness) to draw the attention of the gods themselves:

One day, as Zeus was quarreling with Hera, maintaining that the woman had more pleasure in the sexual act than the man while Hera insisted that the contrary was so, they resolved to send for Tiresias to ask him, since he had experienced both conditions. Responding to the question that he was asked, Tiresias said that if there were ten parts (to pleasure) the man enjoyed only one and the woman nine... Hera, the guardian of the orthodoxy of marriage, is enraged when faced with the evidence of how little

attention women pay her in comparison to Aphrodite. In revenge, she blinds Tiresias, but Zeus, who found the answer entirely to his liking, makes him into a seer. (p. 11)

This quote about Tiresius (with respect to the binary of sex and gender identity) reveals several standpoint possibilities that I think can be applied to Chang-Ross or Mary regarding issues of racial or religious identity. First and most important, Tiresius is described as physically male at this point in the story, but that description is inadequate. The inadequacy lies in the fact that a “mere” male would not be able to adjudicate opinion between the sex/gender binary that is Zeus and Hera. These gods are interested in Tiresius’ opinion, precisely because he is *not* only male. He brings his prior female experience as a cohesive continuity to his current sex/gender identity. To be sure, this understanding of identity is ancient, but has also been incorporated into modern, Western thinking. Dewey (1997) describes the continuity of identity as a seamless gathering of experience into a completely integrated whole:

The principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after. (p. 35)

A fully integrated personality... exists only when the successive experiences are integrated with one another. (p. 44)

Taken together, these quotes reinforce the notion that identity is best understood as Heideggerian *Dasein* (where *Dasein* is Being fully interwoven between perceiver and the perceived through time). Similarly to Tiresius, Mary is a continuity of identity between Christianity and Judaism that gives her insight into the fundamental differences and similarities across both religions. In a very real way, Mary finds herself in a queer place where she can speak authoritatively to the polarities of these two religions.

The queer location of religiously in-between identity has one additional benefit: It provides a single point of absolute resistance to a master narrative that would render it invisible. Though Tiresias provides Zeus and Hera *an* answer to the question of sexual pleasure, it does not logically follow that this answer is *the* answer (true for all time, places, and peoples). Clearly, Tiresius only speaks from his own lived experience. Yet, Hera's anger stems from the fact that his single answer, arising from queer location, lays waste to the possibility that Her divine and totalizing point of view was true for all time, places, and peoples. Hera learned from one queer person that at least one exception existed to dispute "the rule." Thus, it appears that queerness does not establish positivistic essence, but rather precludes a positivistic conclusion in any particular direction. That is powerful, indeed. In Mary's example, imagine what it would mean to engage her in a simplistic conversation about the nature of Christianity or Judaism. Totalizing discourses or base stereotyping would simply be unable to stand in the presence of Mary's experiences and the complex identity they represent. From this location, queer religious identity leaves open the possibility of "more" and "better" information coming forward, past and beyond the knowledge we collectively have.

Turning is the transgression of boundaries. That power of queer religious place has its price, because it only makes sense within the hegemony of social expectations based on given religious identities. What happens when one turns from the straight and narrow? Like the seer who must give up eyesight for second sight, what has to be given up to be empowered in queer place? Ahmed (2006) explores "how bodies become straight by 'lining up' with lines that are already given... [and] how compulsory heterosexuality operates as a straightening device, which rereads signs of queer desire as

deviations from the straight line” (p. 23). Mujahid had been given compulsory “lines” of expectation from which his turn to Islam was also seen as a “deviation from the straight line.” He describes how he understood the “chilly” environment of his upbringing when he turned, but remained in the same physical community:

This is my community. Then I converted to Islam. Now that was very revealing, because I’m out of the group. I’m not from somewhere else now. So he’s chosen after all of this nurturing that he’s gotten from us right here, he’s stepped outside of this mold right here... Ew. It was very chilly. It was very, very chilly. (Mujahid)

Mujahid’s relationship with his community contains two experiences that form a boundary or border that he must straddle to maintain his new religious identity. He is “not from somewhere else” and he has “stepped outside of this mold,” meaning that he is simultaneously “here” and “not here” by virtue of the *contrast* he exposes to the normalizing lines of expectation (described by Ahmed above) that form his community’s “background.”

But why should difference be perceived as a violation? What is it about the establishment of this border that creates anxiety and invites ridicule or steely silence? Heidegger (1993a) in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* provides insight into the answer to these questions as he describes the way a boundary behaves and operates:

A boundary is not that which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential unfolding*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. That for which room is made *is always granted and hence is joined*, that is, gathered, by virtue of a locale, that is by such a thing as the bridge. [first emphasis in original, second emphasis added] (p. 356)

When something comes across the boundary (here understood as a bridge), it is experienced as unexpected, as queer. To convert, cross over, even genuine interaction is experienced as a transgression of the norm. It denaturalizes the bridge and the queer Being as “naturally” occurring, instead revealing that the gathering of essence is only made possible through the construction of that which creates and reinforces difference. Heidegger’s words also imply that the boundary produces the queer location’s “essential unfolding” because it allows for something to be noticed when it otherwise would be subject to *verfallen* (a state of “falling” lack of awareness). And in the awakening to Being of that border, each side of the border is “always granted and hence is joined.”

In the case of Mujahid, muslims are not a new phenomenon in African-American communities, but are usually seen in the Heideggerian “fallen” state. Once someone *within* the Black and Christian community converts (or turns) to that which is outside (Islam), the conflation of Black and Christian is immediately contested by the boundary between Christianity and Islam. And once that contestation is visible, it is “always granted” because the anomaly exists within the community (which Heidegger calls a “locale”) and not in a faceless other place. From Mujahid’s queer religious identity, conversion is never quite resolved internally, because there is also an external dimension that prevents that resolution from ever coming about. To bring that resolution about, the community would have to erase the lines of expectations it sets down altogether.

Encountering Queer Religious Identity

To this point, I have endeavored to achieve two primary goals: an exploration of the rich meaning narrative research brings forward (and how that meaning has even affected my own sense of Being through this research process), as well as a leap into the

“religiously queer” theory/insight-building process that a phenomenological rendering of religious conversion and intensification yields. In what follows, I maintain a vigilance of those previous *general* insights so that I may more explicitly render *pedagogical* insights into the educational processes that I lead and in which I find myself.

In this next section, I follow the example set forth by Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2003) as they suggest that phenomenology can be an effective link between democratic education and possible queer religious identities within that educational setting. In describing hermeneutics, they also describe what I think is the primary goal of education:

The god Hermes, from which hermeneutics gets its name, was a go-between figure, working borders and boundaries and opening up what seemed previously closed, stirring up what seemed previously settled, questioning what seemed obvious, stealing away with what seemed secure. (pp. 38-39)

Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen describe Hermes in much the way I think of myself as an educator committed to the success of students in my own classrooms. Instead of preparing students to be cogs in an economic system, I aspire to create critical thinkers who are comfortable with ambiguity. In lieu of fostering the mentality of an apparatchik, I want deeper insights into how I can nurture an intellectual. Fundamentally, I believe educators must be the Hermes of their own classrooms “working borders and boundaries,” “opening up,” “stirring up,” “questioning,” and, yes, destabilizing an all-too-confident sense of security that can silence critical thinking.

To accomplish this task, I advocate that educators must: 1) understand how people with queer religious identity might “show up” in an educational setting; 2) learn pedagogical techniques that encourages queer religious expression as a “gift” to the class;

and 3) take care to help religiously non-queer students successfully navigate that encounter as well.

Negotiating Queer Religion: Phenomenological Ambiguity

Achieving unique insight from a queer position does necessarily exempt people with religiously queer identity from having to interact with others. Each must negotiate their religious conversion or intensification in *every* new space upon entry, and that negotiation is always contextually dependent on the space itself and the people who inhabit that space. When entry itself can be seen as a challenge to traditional norms, this process of negotiation can be dangerous. What can be expected when a religiously queer intruder intrudes? Are there incentives to remain silent or outright penalties to visibility? Anzaldúa (1987) suggests that all negotiations of this queer difference will have to address the basic fear that a queer person embodies:

The queer are the mirror reflecting the... tribe's fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, inhuman, non-human. (p. 18)

In what follows, I explore the transgressive nature of religious conversion and intensification and several possible phenomenological responses to that interaction via space, time, relationship and body. And having explored the links between religious conversion and intensification with queer identity, these social engagements begin to lend insight to those moments when an educator encounters this curious other.

Lived body and space: Welcoming defiance. It stands to reason that when Ahmed (2006) describes lines of social expectations, these lines are logically followed and enforced with a sanctioning process. One must either yield to the coercive nature of those lines or choose to openly bear the consequences. One of my participants, Theresa,

opted to openly defy expectations and sought religious conversion as a response to the personally insulting experience of being told who she was by somebody else. She describes her inner resistance to being “taught” about herself:

But it was just this *yearning or this thing inside of me* that I knew that there was more to what somebody else was saying. I wanted my own experiences. I wanted my own truth. I wanted my own journey. And not somebody – because just like I tell most people that are religious or Christians. Most of everything that you believe came from somebody else. It did not come from your own experience or within yourself. It came from listening to somebody else. [emphasis added] (Theresa)

In this quote, Theresa has a deep sense that her lived reality is worth fighting for, because her body tells her that something else is possible. She seeks the fulfillment of a promise born “inside of” her. But, it leaves open the question of what one should do when overcome with the urge for personal experience. It strikes me that Theresa yearned for the possibilities that her own conversion experience eventually yielded, but it took social action to actually create room, a kind of figurative space, for that conversion. Bhabha (2008) explains that the dynamic of defiance must be undertaken “performatively.” He says: “Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively” (p. 3). But how is defiance “performed?” Does performance necessarily imply a particular space and setting in which to perform and a body to act it out? What does it look like, and can it be recognized as a desire for an open space for an evolving and complex identity? Theresa’s “performance” ended up taking the form of a rather public and firm *refusal* to ecclesiastical authority:

I was upset with the pastor [who insisted Theresa be baptized again]. I know that. I said, I don't need to get baptized again. And I don't think, at that church, I did. I didn't get baptized again... And my husband, at that time, I

had remarried. He got baptized. Him and his son got baptized, but I *refused* to get baptized again... I felt Jesus didn't get baptized but once. The disciples, you know, when Paul was – I mean, when John was baptizing all the disciples and all of the people, I had never heard anybody go back for the second time. (Theresa)

First and foremost, the catalytic point of resistance was the attempted manipulation of Theresa's body. She had misgivings about general theologies, but her firm point of refusal came when it came to her body's participation in a baptism she deemed unnecessary. Moreover, the pastor in Theresa's story is a familiar figure. When encountering Theresa's misgivings, he resorts to pressure to move through her defiant refusal. What do we do with the defiance that manifests around the expectations of an authority figure? Can the defiance be understood as a logical and rational reaction to a pedagogical assumption about who is in the metaphoric *and* actual room experiencing the "lesson?" The fact is that Theresa's pastor handled the situation in a way that encouraged Theresa to leave that environment, forever. When Theresa found that she could not inhabit the space figuratively or metaphorically, it was only a mere thought away that she (her body) needed to leave the physical space also. She opted, instead, to attend a new church (a new space) that respected her identity (and embodiment) *as is*. What might have happened if the pastor had responded differently, without the use of terse authority?

When it comes to teaching through this moment, Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2003) suggest that we must invite that defiance into the fabric of the encounter, because it reveals the invisible lines of power that create a sense of "normalcy." How should I engage a defiant person to my own authority as an educator? What space can I (or should I) create that invites the possibility of defiance? What might that experience say about the power an educator has in establishing a curriculum, especially surrounding concepts of

identity that I typically undertake in intergroup dialogue? Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen say:

The troublesome... [are] understood only pathologically. They are rarely taken to be as commentary on *us* and what we and our curriculum guides and our institutions have presumed. [emphasis in original] (p. 38)

While I recognize that there are some necessary limits to defiance and refusal in a classroom space, I think it is very important to consider the source of that defiance in the equation. Might this defiance be rooted in my own lack of scope or perspective to the complexity of who this student is? Have I inadvertently closed the space to their Being? Am I, in turn, refusing to be the subject of “commentary” when a student refuses my approach? I suspect that queer religious identity is likely to present the possibility of a “teachable moment” where the *teacher* is the one doing the learning about what it means to truly create open *lived space and embodiment*.

Lived time: Deceptive engagement with non-engagement. The interplay of body and space necessarily implies time. If an educator can create conducive space for real bodies, does that necessarily mean that the relatively short amount of time spent in a class will make a difference? How does the space of religious identity manifest in time? Because of the relatively invisible nature of religious identity, there is always the choice to hide one’s identity instead of reveal it. This is certainly true in personal settings, but is obviously more pronounced in those settings where the approval of the authority figure (for example, a teacher) is paramount. If a person is able to articulate religious identity to any significant degree, that identification will necessarily be located within a relational system of incentives and sanctions that either encourages expression of that identity (if

dominant) or prevents full disclosure of that identity (if non-dominant or queer). I acknowledge the possibility that even in a dominant position, full disclosure is complicated. But I think it is entirely reasonable to assume that non-dominant disclosure is rife with more danger and encourages more discretion. What circumstances determine whether a non-dominant, queer religious identity will be revealed? And if revealed, what are the various motivations for doing so? Are some parts revealed and others occluded? Is this revelation something that is inevitable, all in due time? Bhabha (2008) provides insight into the possible motivations of non-dominant identity status. He says:

The very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's *avenging* anger. [emphasis in original] (pp. 63-64)

Bhabha's notion of space and place is suggesting that identification with non-dominant identity is a "space of splitting" where multiple motivations are at play. There is clearly a desire to experience identity in the way that is not curtailed with social power (as in the case of dominant identity), but doing so means elimination of that which makes one different and unique. The space of splitting is akin to motivation that works at cross-purposes. My participants experienced Bhabha's splitting pull in that they tended to opt for non-disclosure at times when they did not feel safe, but nevertheless chose to keep their queer religious identities invisible (via surface level engagement) rather than choosing to occupy the "master's place," tantamount to rejecting their conversion experiences.

Many of the people that I work with, if we did get down to talking about faith and what faith meant, and belief, and then what are the limits, I would probably *become* somebody that may be deemed to be Satan... I cannot in

any seriousness talk about a trinity as in three separate entities. I can talk about a trinity in a metaphorical sense if you want to kind of explain Daoism in that kind of sense, you know, but that's up and then just on the level of the historical validity and accuracy of what a Christian truth is supposed to be. (Art)

I fear exclusion [now]. For example, I will not mention my beliefs to those in the Boy Scouts because I do not want to be "excommunicated" or whatever it is they will do when they learn I do not believe in a "higher power". (Ben)

The peak of my experience [of living with a Christian host family] is going to McDonalds with the host family and kind of thanking for the food. It *was* very embarrassing to me, because... I also didn't feel comfortable just, you know demonstrating any type of religion. So I already – I was doubting. So I didn't really want to be in public. (Henrike)

Here in Maryland, even though my family is, some of my family is here, I live by myself. So, you know I *went* searching, and I really don't talk a lot about this to them because it causes conflict. Because they are so grounded in Christianity. (Theresa)

I had a boss who was a Promise Keeper. He asked me if I was Christian. And I told him that I believed that Jesus Christ was God and that I try to follow his teachings. What I didn't go on to say was -- that -- what I would go on to say today is I also believe that he's God and I'm God... So nowadays having been laid off and been out of work for a long time, I am extremely circumspect *now*. (Wolf)

In each of these quotes, my participants are choosing various levels of engagement, in particular spaces and times. Theresa, for example, simply does not talk about religious identity *at all* with her family, because she has an incentive to preserve peace among her relatives (though the preservation of this peace carries a price of negating genuine religious conversation). This is a choice that she continues to make every time she engages her family, even though her “journey” began in the past. Art and Wolf choose to engage in a superficial and evasive kind of conversation *at work* that

appears open, but actually conceals a great deal of their true identity. Wolf is more specific about time when he says that he is “extremely circumspect *now*.” Ben and Henrike are somewhere in the middle where they reveal very little about themselves when others clearly have a level of exclusionary power over them, but choose revelation where power is more mitigated. For Ben, that power is something he contends with in the present, while for Henrike (now an adult), the experience of her host family is a past occurrence from which she learns a great deal.

One thing is true across all these cases, however. They all see themselves in distrustful opposition to a dominant “master” norm that they need to carefully manage for their own protection (as the “native”) when the time is appropriate. Said another way, the *place* of their safety is also contingent upon *when* they are. Is this situation hopeless? What is actually taking place when an invisible identity is engaging with dominance *on its own terms*? Who is truly engaging, and what is being experienced in that dynamic? Levinas (1979) in *Totality and Infinity* describes both possibilities of the “split” to which Bhabha alludes:

To be sure, most of the time the *who* is a *what*. We ask “Who is Mr. X?” and we answer: “He is the President of the State Council,” or “He is Mr. So-and-so.” The answer presents itself as a quiddity; it refers to a system of relations. [emphasis in original] (p. 177)

The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no “interiority” permits avoiding. (p. 201)

Levinas’ first quote is about engagement where people are “what’s” through false or deceptive relationship, lacking the “obligation” or “interiority” found in the second quote. It appears that there are two strains of self-preservation taking place here. In one sense

self-preservation means maintaining the cohesion of one's identity. Simultaneously, *self-preservation* means maintaining personal safety. Both of these alternatively-emphasized senses are operating as people with Queer religious backgrounds produce a heightened sense of awareness of the subtle shifts in the "system of relations." One cannot face a "system" and a "face" at the same time, because each precludes the other. And without a face, the "primordial discourse" is not a safe experience, because such a genuine and deep discourse requires a guarantee of interiority or obligation.

The depth of this tragic scenario can be seen in the way that my youngest and oldest participants addressed personal disclosure (or the lack thereof) across time and the engagement of the "primordial discourse" in their own lives. Ben (the youngest) does not yet see a face with whom he can engage in that process of disclosure, not even with his parents. And Juanita (the oldest) sees a face where one had not existed for most of her life, in her estranged brother.

Mark: Do you think that some of the hostility you've experienced when you have disclosed your atheism has affected the decisions you've made about not talking to your parents?

Ben: Yeah, yeah. To a certain extent, yeah. They could react poorly. I don't think my dad will. My mother might, even though she's somewhat skeptical maybe. But I'm not gonna risk it. I'm not gonna risk ruining our relationship or losing money or anything. (Ben)

Mark: I want to just briefly explore this idea, your reuniting with your brother. To what extent – to what extent is that – is that just two people coming together? Is that two religions coming together? How did you negotiate that?

Juanita: It is. It's two religions coming together and it's two people coming to the realization they're at the end of their road. (Juanita)

The mutual requirements of obligation and interiority are most interesting here in the stories of Ben and Juanita, because it appears that the movement between the two quotes by Levinas is simply a function of getting older (linear movement across time) and more secure in one's identity, even if it is queer. Truthfully, that arc of 40 years may, in fact, be an accurate description for the process of religious disclosure for many people. But as an educator, I must pay attention to the underlying desperation contained in Ben's words (though he delivered them with controlled calm). For him, primordial engagement means creating a problem where he might "risk ruining" the relationship he has with his parents. Is there a role that education can play in helping a young person like Ben develop the *confidence* time brings in cultivating "face" in his personal and familial relationships? Is (or should) the burden of disclosure always be fully placed on the queer person? Are there other ways to encourage openness where a classroom can assume the necessary obligations to make all students feel welcome and safe, especially if that safety is not currently found at home? I observe the reality that my participants tend to opt for non-disclosure due to a lack of a welcoming environment in which to do so. Is it possible to induce a similar kind of learning and maturity in a classroom that aging produces?

As a self-described "contemplative" educator, Lichtmann (2005) offers me a tool that can approximate (though obviously not replace) the wisdom that comes with time.

She suggests regular reflection as a part of the learning process:

But reflection takes time... The linear paradigm that has us all in its grip—especially in the classroom—makes us feel that we must continually move on, and follow a hidden but compelling straight line to some distant goal. In so doing, we nearly always neglect the *re* in reflection. The *re* ("back" or "again") in reflection means we must circle back, return to ourselves and our subjects, going deeper

each time... We must try at least to pretend that time is not a straight line, but a continuously widening and deepening spiral. Although reflection takes time, it gives back, reducing the needless spinning of wheels. (pp. 67-68)

When I first read this quote, I was struck how it hearkened back to the lines of expectations that Ahmed (2006) describes. Yet these lines are placed as a burden on educators, not religiously queer individuals, as we ceaselessly march toward “some distant goal.” What if I were to take an approach to curriculum and instruction that rewrote those lines of expectation? What would happen if I see education as something that is naturally recursive, giving time to digest that which was given and built? Lichtmann promises that this redoubling of time promises to “reduce the needless spinning of wheels.” Even in that promise, the impact of time is seen. “Wheels spinning” is an activity that happens over time, but the place does not change. It leads me to believe that a student like Ben could benefit from activities that focus on *lived time*, because they allow him time to reflect on his identity as a way to build confidence in understanding his identity and expressing it to those around him with whom he is in lived relationship.

Lived relationship: Explicit incipit. If looking at a musical composition or book, the words *incipit* and *explicit* refer to beginning and ending movements of the piece. Their etymologies reveal the basic nature of these words where “incipit” comes from the Latin *incipere*, meaning “beginning or first words.” Its opposite, “explicit,” comes from the Latin *explicitus*, meaning “the end of a book or piece.” Yet when rendering insights of the lived experience of religious conversion and intensification, I continue to emphasize the verbal nature of relationships, but reverse the obvious order.

The lived relationships of my religiously queer participants suggest that those relationships that are most important, and which cause the most struggle, are those that are simply a *given* as an orienting network of connection. Entering into religious conversion and intensification disrupts that which is given, implying that queerness means an *end* taking place in lived relationships before a new *beginning* has the opportunity to appear. For the lived relationships of religiously queer people, I suggest that *explicit* paradoxically (and yet, logically) precedes *incipit*. Three of my participants (Art, Mary, and Wolf) bring this effect particularly to light:

Maybe the shift from the militant Atheist to the inquiring Agnostic has made me more sociable or amenable or easier because I would have been more abrasive. (Art)

Once it came to a head and I said okay, I'm cutting the ties between me and Christianity, he thought okay, are we gonna divorce...? 13 years [since having converted away from Evangelical Christianity], something like that. We've worked through some things, and of course on the outside I'm going to church with him, I'm even teaching. (Mary)

It basically blew my family out of the water. I ended up leaving my first wife and smashing relationships that had existed for years. It basically threw the entire family into turmoil for years. (Wolf)

Art's story emphasizes the *incipit* nature of relationships in how his skills at relationship-building underwent drastic positive change after his own conversion process. Simply, his relationships ended, because he was more "abrasive" in the past. Wolf's story is particularly illustrative of the *explicit* relationship moments of queer religious experience (which for him meant a religious conversion to neo-paganism in a conservative Catholic family). He could have remained a lapsed Catholic, but the pull of neo-pagan spirituality was strong enough that he chose the avenue of "smashing relationships" to make it

happen. Having gone through that period, however, Wolf now has a very stable family life with his wife and children. And Mary's story suggests the whole dynamic of explicit to incipit. As a result of her religious conversion, her marriage was on the brink of divorce (and she acknowledges that there are some parts of her marriage that have been strained forever). Her conversion brought about an *explicit* end to the way her marriage used to function. But she is also illustrative of the *incipit* possibilities that can develop when one undergoes conversion, because she can truthfully say that they have "worked through some things."

When opening an educational space for people who are likely experiencing relationship turmoil, I am reminded of the calm wisdom of Palmer (1993) in *To Know as We are Known*:

The relationships of the self require not only sensory evidence of the other; not only logical linkages of cause and effect; they also require inner understanding of the other, which comes from empathy; a sense of the other's value... The most expansive *adaequatio* between ourselves and the world—one that does not narrow and impoverish reality—is found in our capacity for relationship. In relating to the other we find ourselves drawing on "instruments" the observer role never evokes. As our relatedness is called out, we find ourselves knowing reality more deeply and roundly than the observer ever can. (p. 53)

Palmer's words suggest that relationships are necessarily created and sustained from an "inner understanding" that rejects the very idea of being a by-stander to our own lives. And in Palmer's words, I also observe that he has a particular curriculum in mind that encourages the building of relationships. He suggests that "we find ourselves drawing on 'instruments' the observer role never evokes." What are these instruments that elude objective observation? What instruments require "understanding," "empathy," or a "sense

of the other's value?" And can I use and replicate these instruments to remain sympathetic to the relationship experiences of those who experience religious conversion and intensification?

Though the question of "instruments" comes as something of a riddle, the answer, of course, goes back to the ideas of *explicit* and *incipit*. The instruments are words themselves. The primary difference between observer words and those that are instruments of relationship-building, however, lie in whether those words are carefully chosen to avoid harm to relationships. To avoid harm, words must avoid being *explicit* (because of the destructive nature of endings) or *incipit* (because of the weight of coercive expectations placed on new relationships). Instead, words must follow the example Mary sets forth. They must struggle to stay in the *present*, between endings and beginnings, where *feelings* and *needs* are most immediate. As a recognized expert in non-violent communication, Rosenberg (2005) suggests that the development of literacy of one's own feelings and needs is the most important step in the maintenance of relationships. Clearly, this is essential learning for those who experience religious queerness.

In working with a university student attempting to improve one of his relationships, Rosenberg had the following conversation:

The student said: "Well, I don't have any feelings about it."
I said, "I hope that's not so." He said, "Why?" I said,
"You'd be dead." (p. 33)

The point that Rosenberg is suggesting here is that relationships struggle under the burdens of *explicit* and *incipit*, because relationships are fueled and nurtured in the present, not in the past or future. What would be a curricular choice around lived

relationship? How might attention to the present be achieved as a pedagogical goal?

Rosenberg's solution to the illiteracy of feelings and needs is deceptively simple, and quite phenomenological. He says, "Just listen to your body for a moment" (p. 33). In a single, simple phrase, Rosenberg fundamentally and phenomenologically captures the way lived relationships function: "Just listen (body) to your body (body, space) for a moment (time)." And when this happens, religiously queer people have something to offer us all.

Queer Gifts: The Opening of New Possibilities

Having explored those sensitizing insights into religious conversion and intensification, I turn to the way that the queerness of religious identity can be drawn forth (as in *educare*) as a positive source of knowledge for everyone in the educational setting. Once that work has been done, queer religious identity becomes a gift of perspective and insight for those comfortably living in the center. I submit that an educator who has attended to the lived body, space, time, and relationships of religiously queer people will be more successful in providing curricular experiences that allow queerness into educational spaces for their full expression. In what follows, I suggest three possible curriculum choices for the appropriate expression of the experience of religious identity: poetry, art, and mythological fiction.

Queer words, religious poetry. In describing religious conversion and intensification to others and in sharing this experience, what form makes the most sense for its delivery? *How* should (or can) one share this change in identity? It strikes me that one of the most powerful ways of sharing complex human experience is poetry, precisely *because* it is polysemous, just as religious experience itself conveys multiple meanings

on many levels. In considering this point, I recall the words of one of my participants as he was discussing his own struggles over self-expression. Wolf cites the experience of the prophet Mohammed as an example where words can languish behind lived experience:

No words could describe the actual experiences that I've had. I can describe them in words, but no words can do them justice. When Mohammed was in the cave and wrestled with the angel, the angel wrapped his arms around him and said, "Recite." The instruction was -- the description of what happened was a metaphorical description because Mohammed could not possible have explained what he felt like, that he was being crushed and forced -- something within him was being forced out.
(Wolf)

Wolf says that "no words can do them justice," but I wonder what he might have said had he been given a *poetic* outlet for his ineffable experiences. What words might he have produced in an educational setting where his struggles to speak and write were skillfully nurtured through carefully chosen poetry? Would he even consider his own words in our conversation "poetic" and worthy of that notice? With deep respect for who he is, in all of his complexity, below are parts of his conversation with me, offered as poetry:

The Process of Wolf

Not a Wolf

Going to church and being bored

My mother tried to explain,
Didn't understand a blessed thing.

A lapsed Catholic basically
Ethical self came from... Stan Lee
...and Star Trek

Becoming a Wolf

I was meditating
I felt like I was ascending
I was going through the clouds
I remember

sort of
like either
coming out of the trance

Like, "Holy mackerel"
Like I had been given something
Like I understood something for the first time

And I didn't know what.

A Wolf
We make up stories all the time
tell them to ourselves over and over

I actually prefer "witch"
It's more direct. Simpler, clearer
and more direct.
(Wolf)

When building a subtle understanding of identity, a pedagogical practice that includes the sensibility of ethnopoetics likely could provide an outlet where one had not existed beforehand. Rothenberg and Rothenberg (1983), including their citation of Diamond (1974), describe ethnopoetics as follows:

The poetics in question, which we will speak of as an "ethnopoetics," ...has taken the form of what Stanley Diamond, in a recently renewed "critique of civilization," calls "the search for the primitive" or, more precisely, the "attempt to define a primary human potential." ...The oral recovery involves a poetics deeply rooted in the powers of song and speech, breath and body, as brought forward across time by the living presence of poet-performers, with or without the existence of a visible/literal text... [involving] the intricacies (imagistic and symbolic) of multileveled oral narratives. (Diamond, p. 71; Rothenberg & Rothenberg, pp. xi-xiii)

I believe that the conversations and reflections of my own participants can be understood as an ethnopoetics of the familiar, because these ten individuals challenge our understanding of religious reality through deeply impactful words not always deemed to

be “skilled” poetry, a hallmark of ethnopoetics. Prior to one of the group conversations, in one of her reflections, Theresa opted to produce a poem directly as more expressive of her identity. When she gave it to me prior to the group meeting, she asked if she could read it to the other participants, because its expression needed to be delivered orally. Intuitively, she understood the ethnopoetic meaning of “multi-leveled oral narratives.”

REFLECTIONS

Reflections caused me to explore my mind
Places I hadn't visited in a very long time

Scenes that have shaken me to my very core
Doors that were shut have been opened once more

To think I was treated as if I had a contagious disease
But I had been raped, a baby had been conceived

Oh how I wished that somebody anybody could see
It wasn't my fault what had happened to me

These were the church people that knew me as a child
Now looking down on me as if I've broken every vow

Pushing me out as if I had done something wrong
Instead of embracing me and inviting me to the throne

Depression became the blanket that covered me each night
There was so much darkness around but I knew I had to fight

Oh but underneath that darkness there was a flicker of light
Waiting to be noticed it having potential to be bright

It wasn't easy to push through all the pain and fear
But I wasn't alone God's grace was always near

Even though I didn't feel Him or his grace back then
Something was my strength since I didn't have a friend

My journey wasn't one I would have chosen for myself
I believe if I had a glimpse before I may have chosen death

One day I woke up and stepped out in the wind

Realizing my life is starting over again

I've left the past and now embracing life today
 Forgiving those who mistreated me along the way

I have so much to be thankful for and so much love to give
 Everyday is an opportunity to encourage somebody to live.
 (Theresa)

Theresa's poem is a testimony of her own experience, delivered in a way that emphasizes the journey she has undertaken and the various stopping points along the way. In reading her reflection, I am reminded of the fact that Theresa and my other participants experienced a phenomenon that renders as a journey. What power does poetry have in expressing a journey? Does the poem itself contribute to the journey, just as the journey must contribute to the poem? Can "journey" poetry be a curriculum of identity?

Currently, modern educators, conflict resolvers, and social justice advocates use poetry as a way to illustrate the seemingly small moments of any journey as deeply significant in the broader scheme of identity and experience in the world. A contemporary international conflict resolver, highly-paid and sought after, Lederach (2010) uses poetry as a way of diagnosing conflict in the world through the way he experiences that conflict even upon arrival. He uses a Japanese method of poetry, called *haibun*, that is specific about the journeying process that I find appealing as a pedagogical tool in the eliciting of complicated identity. Lederach writes of the value of *haibun* poetry:

And poets? Poets have cataract-peeled eyes. They notice things. They strip rough reality bare while giving us unexpected life... Basho wrote in *haibun*—in few words, he took note of people and places where his travels had led. He titled one of those traveling essays *Oku no hosomichi*.

The first part of his chosen phrase translates as “the narrow road.” The second, multilayered with meanings, conveys the idea that this narrow road will take him far into the backcountry, to the source of life in the mountains, to the very soul of his country. Yet the same phrase signals an inward journey, to the very depths of his soul. (pp. 7-8)

Lederach emphasizes that a physical (lived body) journey contains within it the very foundation of identity. As he and Basho take “note of people and places,” they also take “an inward journey, to the very depths of his soul.” I think this form of poetry provides a key component in the expression of Being: the continuous journey. In recounting the lived places where they have been, can students find language that mirrors their own identity? Just as my own research practice has found the poetizing process to be useful in rendering the lived experiences of my participants, they, too, have found power in this form of expression.

Art as the Alchemy of Openness. I have never thought of myself as artistic (and, truthfully, I still do not believe that I have serious artistic talent). But I am absolutely convinced that artistic expression is an invaluable avenue through which religious expression of identity can genuinely and appropriately enter a classroom setting. My own research process used an art activity called the “Spirit Map” (See Appendices D and E) to solicit the way each participant viewed his or her own lived experience of religious conversion or intensification. I brought the activity to each group with a request that echoed what O’Reilly (1998) asks of all the art she appreciates:

I like art that has a feeling of “I had to make this or die. I had to make this so badly that it didn’t bother me that I don’t know color theory.” So my first question of you, if you wish to begin this inquiry, is “What do you *have* to make? What can only you make?” (p. 40)

The answers to O'Reilley's questions are implicit in the very questions she asks. There is only one thing that anyone can bring that no one else can: the reflection of personal lived experience. And because life is not necessarily something that happens with logic or precision, an artistic endeavor can contain within it a myriad of contradictions that nevertheless cohere.

Though I do not have textual data around the behavior of my participants in the very beginning of their group conversations, I could tell that the experience of coming together carried an air of anticipatory discomfort. There was a nervous energy in the room, though I could also tell that the nervousness was cautious, but curious. Without delay, I brought out large sheets of paper and colored markers. Their expressions were dubious, and I assured them that this was a part of the data collection process. One participant said she had no idea that dissertation data collection would have them *draw* something (with a pronounced emphasis on the word *draw*). It was curious that they did not initially see art as being a part of the process of constructing knowledge. And in their defense, I did not initially see this possibility either. The result, however, was marvelous. In a matter of moments, hesitation dissipated and the creation of personal art became an experience of sharing resources, space, and the experience itself.

In addition to creating room for the expression of religious identity, art has a way of revealing a complementary story to what is delivered as speech or text. For example, Henrike and Wolf both drew maps that prominently featured their "now" selves in the middle of their map with other stimuli and social forces operating around them. Here are the words that they used to describe this central location:

I don't think I've actually presented [a] type of chronology... So I've kind of put everything that is significant for me these days in the middle. (Henrike)

Walking spiritual path. Notice there's me. There is my disconnection from myself. And there is finding myself. (Wolf)

When coupled with their introduction of their map, a particular point comes across. The centrality of the person they drew is mirrored in the language describing that person. Henrike is overt and suggests that she has “put everything that is significant” in the middle with her. She has chosen to “center” her experiences despite having previous experiences (described above) of very real displacement. Wolf also uses a phrase to claim the central space also saying, “Notice there's me.” The centrality of this position in his art is not necessarily mirrored in the cautious, somewhat closeted daily work reality he experiences when he chooses to reveal or not reveal his neo-pagan religious identity. What does it mean to place oneself in the center, when one's religious identity is queer and marginalized? Is this a sign of self-confidence or a hopeful prayer? Both narrative/art collections suggest that art is a vehicle to name an “as if” world of the self that simultaneously challenges the very reality it seeks to describe.

In another example, I wish to point out how words without art may actually tell only part of the story of identity. Juanita, Karen, and Mujahid each made very explicit references to directionality in the explanation of their spirit maps:

My map is very linear, and it goes by ages. (Juanita)

I have a meandering path that my spirit map shows. (Karen)

I actually attempted to look at it progressively, and probably, if I'd had a double [sheet of paper], I would have

just built one of them on top and showed it as a progressive stage. (Mujahid)

When looking at their respective spirit maps, however, one notices a different story. Juanita says that her map is “very linear,” but a glance at the map itself reveals that “linear” for Juanita means an outward *spiral*, not a traditional line of left to right. Karen says that her map “meanders.” Yet, her map is superimposed with a definite “trend” line that forces her “meandering” story onto a clearly straight, undeviating line. And Mujahid says that his map is comprised of “progressive stages.” One would expect a series of lines and barriers. Yet his map shows his story to be more like a river that flows into the future where all the stages merge together. How am I to make sense of the contradiction of text and art? Does one speak a “truer” truth than the other? Is the truth contained within the complex merging of the two? And what would have been lost had art not been a part of the expression of religious conversion and intensification?

At its core, I believe that the addition of art to this project was the magical ingredient to the alchemy of expression. As alchemy seeks to transform something previously experienced as negative (lead) into something positive (gold), art allowed a deeper insight into the lived experience of religious identity. Maxine Greene (1995) firmly advocates for the use of the arts in education, and my own research supports her assertion. She says:

The qualities of art that allow it to indict established reality and evoke images of liberation... [are] as I am [suggesting] here, the relevance of art in overcoming the inability to see others. (p. 136)

I think Greene’s words are unmistakably true, and I would only add the following: to see *oneself* and to be seen *by* others. In terms of the phenomenon of seeing self, seeing

others, and being seen by others, art serves a very foundational purpose in the “seeing” or expression of Being. Heidegger (1993c) describes this process:

All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings, in as such, in essence, poetry. The essence of art, on which both the artwork and the artist depend, is the setting-itself-into-work of truth... The essence of poetry, in turn, is the founding of truth. We understand founding here in a triple sense: founding as bestowing, founding as grounding, and founding as beginning. (pp. 197, 199)

Though the art project I had my participants undertake is obviously crude compared to the art found, say, in a gallery, it nevertheless meets the foundational criteria Heidegger describes. When used as a tool of research, the purpose of the art was an expression beyond that of simple “introduction.” Rather, it was designed to provide other people a sense of the Heideggerian “world” that that the artist inhabits. In helping construct an image of that work, the art is “setting-itself-into-work.” And the result is a qualitatively different engagement. When seen as a visual, material expression of a person’s entire reality related to religious conversion and intensification, truth shines through and engages in the co-construction of truth among others. It is in this sense that art invites the “bestowing,” “founding,” and “beginning” of truth between the artist and those who see the art. With art, each individual participates in the founding of the truthful Being of the artist where the entire group constitutes itself into *Mit-Dasein*, or “Being with there.” It is in mutual constitution where all parties see themselves and each other beyond the veneer of what is presented as “I.”

Truthful fiction. In the preceding chapter four, I coin the term *phenomythology* which I would like to raise here again as the phenomenological exploration of identity through the genuine engagement of myth as “truthful fiction.” My own work with

rendering the lived experiences of religious conversion and intensification of others lifted mythology as a legitimate curriculum choice in providing room for the expression of religious identity in a potentially non-threatening manner. Rather than posit myth as “true” in the strictest sense of observable, empirical, and/or scientific fact, I suggest a curricular phenomythology that explores ancient human stories for plot lines or recurring patterns of human experience connected to the lived experiences of body, space, time, and relationship. Using phenomythology, I also subscribe to the idea of exploring religious identity through what people bring and what they do not bring. Commenting on the example of Anne Sexton, a avant-garde feminist educator, Doll (2000) says:

Sexton urged students to interpret their readings from perspectives other than their own. In an effort to shake students away from the false comfort of fixed identities (of themselves, of teachers) she actually wanted students to dis-identify with characters. They should consider the trope of the mask as a means of probing the depths of their own hidden selves. (pp. 92-93)

It is the multi-valent power to disrupt the “fixed” nature of identity that is one of the underlying goals of this research. Through identification and dis-identification with myth, I believe that the construction of the self is made more complex. By engaging these existential factors, I believe that all students, but certainly those who bring a complex religious identity, will find answers to questions within their own lives and their own experiences they did not even know they harbored.

But what of the engagement of that fluid self with the world around it? What does phenomythology mean for *Dasein*, a self engaged with “there,” when the self is fluid? Does the “there” become fluid as well? Is there a mutual fluidity between *Da* and *Sein*? In suggesting a phenomythological curriculum, I suspect that the impact on “outer”

learning will also be significant. Doll (2000) provides insight into the ways that an exploration of myth can “awaken” learning about the world in which students find themselves, particularly as it relates to the idea of simplistic singularity. She says:

Myths, someone once said, awaken us from the unity of nature. They disillusion us about all unities: monotheism, the United States, the whole person, the tyranny of the I (eye). (p. 140)

Both of Doll’s quotes, taken together, suggest a curriculum that provides for total flexibility of identity within a space of learning, because neither the self nor the environment is taken for granted or accepted as fixed.

But now it gets difficult. Which myth should be chosen? If the idea is to create a learning experience around religion and religious identity, should I only use those ancient stories of cultures that are long-gone, leaving only their stories behind? Is there not a certain seduction to make use of stories and myths of contemporary marginalized societies (like the creation stories from Native Americans frequently mined by White, and increasingly Black, shamanism)? Having participated in retreats that (I believe) attempt to respectfully explore stories across cultures (multiculturally), is there an ethical boundary that this kind of curriculum should not cross? And perhaps the most explosive question, should I take seriously the idea of teaching scripture as a phenomythology of human experience? Jardine, Clifford and Friesen (2003) struggle with these very questions of appropriation and sacred literature as they suggest the use of Coyote mythology to explore the phenomenological place of a classroom and how students actually move through that space. They ask:

What if, instead, we tried to take Coyote stories seriously as somehow true of something, as somehow telling of some

things in the lives of these teachers and students, here, in this place? (p. 37)

Ultimately, Jardine, Clifford and Friesen come to the conclusion that it is possible to delve into the multicultural mythological stories, but that it has to be done with a sense of intimacy to the critique of the story, not as seen across a cultural chasm from observer to observed. Yet, can this be done with the “stories” (some would call myths) of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and the like? Surely these religious stories contain phenomythological truths that can be readily accessed, but can I as an educator seriously manage the socio-political backdrop that accompanies these stories? After all, for many people, these are not “myths” at all, but perfect renditions of objective truth (not the “truthful fiction” that I describe above). Or worse, can I as an educator afford *not* to engage these stories when they are so readily engaged and accessed outside of classroom spaces (often in the most uninformed and anti-intellectual ways) in the construction of meaning and purpose?

I have no easy answer that brings universal comfort and ease for this conundrum, but I am in solid agreement with Prothero (2007) about the problem of religious literacy, or better said, the lack thereof. Prothero says:

America’s youth—evangelical or otherwise—are not learning the Bible at home or in religious congregations. But they are not learning about it in school either. In a 1997 study on “The Place of Bible Literature in Public High School English Classes,” only 9 percent of the high school English teachers’ surveys said that they taught either a course or a unit on the Bible. And in 2005 only 8 percent of public school teens reported that their school offered an elective Bible course... Students are learning almost nothing about the Bible during high school—that schools (at least public schools) are failing to function as “chains of memory...” Broader Christian literacy is also hard to find. Many a proponent of inter-religious dialogue assumes that

Christians know their own religious tradition. In fact, inter-religious dialogue assumes basic knowledge on both sides of the religious divide that the discussion is designed to bridge. But this assumption is hollow, at least in the United States. (pp. 32-33)

I raise the issue of biblical literacy, because it is unquestionably one of the “cultural stories” with which most people in the United States do have a relationship of intimacy that is “somehow true of something, as somehow telling of some things in the lives” of people as Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen suggest. Yet what does it mean to enter the paradox that the Bible and its contents are considered a sacred cultural story while many people remain largely ignorant of those contents? How can we engage phenomythology as a curricular possibility if some stories are considered “truthful fiction” and others are simply “truthful?” At its core, my concern with a lack of biblical literacy as a legitimate form of access to truthful fiction (as I have described above) is that it also prevents a more profound kind of social literacy as Friere and Macedo’s (1987) notion of literacy to “read” society. Said another way, can we truly expect students to “read” society if they are not allowed to engage our most sacred texts, like the Bible, in a phenomythological way? Freire and Macedo explain this notion of “reading” society as necessary for any serious transformation, or rewriting, of that society:

Reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* it or *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming it. (p. 35)

Ultimately, the use of mythological stories for the examination of personal narratives is a good curricular choice, though fraught with political turmoil. But the politics surrounding these stories is precisely the reason for the huge gap in literacy around religion and religious identity. To avoid these stories would undermine the very

notion of bringing forward the queer religious identities I believe enter our classrooms. Basically, I think we need to “go there.”

Helping Others Engage the Queerness of Religious Identity

Just because religiously queer people bring gifts of expression to educational spaces, it does not logically follow that everyone wants to engage with that expression or wants to engage it in equal amounts. Yet, I firmly believe that creating more room in educational spaces is a social justice mandate, because more multicultural, progressive space yields a particular social dividend worth noting. When students learn to engage with each other across difference, they obtain skills that help maintain the vitality of interpersonal relationships as well as building peace across groups of people (as in “re-writing” society, described above) in a democratic system. Freire's (2005) own notions of education leading *and causing* a just democratic society are well known:

Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men [sic], on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion. (p. 33)

An education based on Freire's work is understood to be a verb, because a critical, multicultural education is one that helps people go through a process, not simply receive a paper deliverable. It is that process that develops the skills of democratic citizenship and civic engagement. And this is where I fold in the possibility of queering religious identity, because valuing social justice education means creating educational experiences that are predicated upon the full and complex expression of self in intersectional queer form, even when doing so is difficult and not readily rewarded.

In helping others engage with queer religious identity, I fall back on my professional work as a facilitator and administrator of intergroup dialogue. Though they seek to create a conversation about a particular relationship across groups (based on the top/down, dominant/subordinate identities), I relish those moments when a single dynamic of identity reveals itself to be hopelessly interwoven with other identities in a complex intersectional way. How then should one teach about religious complexity when even social justice paradigms often limit themselves to a question of Christian dominance and non-Christian subordination? Is there room for “friendly amendments” to the social justice approach I use in dialogue that makes the manifestation of religious queerness possible? What can my work here add to intergroup dialogue and the opening of educational spaces where identity is a major focus? Can this work reach out to other educational spaces that may not incorporate intergroup dialogue *per se*, but nevertheless explore identity in theory and practice?

To explore these questions, I respectfully borrow a teaching experience from a colleague who led a university-level course in diversity over a brief, winter-term. The time frame is very similar to dialogue and also struggles with many of the theories of identity and social justice that also arise in dialogue. Specifically, Eddy (2008) constructs a classroom environment remarkably similar to dialogue in terms of theoretical orientation, but is different enough that it allows me to engage with educational experiences outside of my own immediate teaching domain. In this diversity course, Eddy raised the issue of LGBT identity and sexuality in educational settings with no initial mention of religion. The class dynamic, however, pivoted its response around

notions of religious identity in direct opposition to sexual identity. Eddy says of that classroom moment:

One White student in particular was adamant that his opinion was correct, especially as it was based on the Bible: gay people are immoral and definitely should not be allowed around children in any setting, educational or otherwise. I tried to ask questions that would allow him to explore his beliefs, without telling him he was “wrong.” However, several of the students in the class had no difficulty in telling him he was wrong. These students were also Christians who believed in the teaching of the Bible. They were clear, however, that there are various interpretations, and that this White student was choosing interpretations that put people who were different in a “less than” category. It was painful to watch the passion on both sides of these arguments. I remember the conflict I felt over agreeing with the group of students who were challenging the White student, but not wanting him to feel ganged up on. What to do? Clearly, we were at an impasse, and in my own experience, an impasse based on faith is nearly insurmountable, especially when the impasse occurs without extensive time to work through it. What stays with me from this experience was the method of challenging different beliefs. The students who challenged the White student were passionate and committed to social justice, but their aggressive approach only backed the White student into a corner and left him there. I think, in some ways, he left the class with a less positive notion of people who are different. (pp. 291-292)

The single most important point I take from Eddy’s experience is the description he gave of it. His own description of it suggested that it was an “impasse based on faith,” not an impasse based on sexuality. Though the conversation was about sexuality, it was not ostensibly played out as a heterosexually-identified student against non-heterosexual students. Instead, it erupted as religious difference within Christianity. As I read about Eddy’s teaching experience, my first question relates to the idea that Eddy may have had students like Mary, who identifies as “Christian” on a form, but is clearly more than that.

Eddy describes the ensuing conversation as one among Christians, but I wonder if it may have been between a Christian and students with religiously queer identity?

Moreover, Eddy's narrative raises the difficulty of discussing religious issues when something is perceived to be factually or morally wrong. Through his struggle to provide space for a student with a conservative Christian background, Eddy falls back to exploratory questions (a pedagogical approach I might undertake in a similar circumstance). But I wonder if he might have benefited from another approach as well. It strikes me that part of the impasse rested on the fact that two voices are missing in that classroom, obviously an "out" LGBT person, but also a religiously queer person who can *openly* bridge the experience of Christianity with another religious perspective.

The educational experience described above is one that provides me an opportunity to explore below several concepts that I believe crucial for teacher education as it relates to religious conversion and intensification: a social justice ethic of "telling location," a reinterpretation of identity as "cohabited" space, an alternative explanation for what may be happening when students are "backed into a corner," and an ethical commitment to the idea that only students can liberate themselves (with helpful educators who embody a healthy dose of humility and self-critique).

Social justice as telling location. When I think about the difficult engagement that Eddy had with his students around sexual identity and religious identity, it strikes me that he opted to not reveal his own sexual identity, because that single, flat identity would redefine how he was perceived as an educator, particularly as having an "agenda." In that moment, I saw that it was not only the students who need a more flexible place in the classroom, but rather, the educator as well. He remained silent about his sexual identity,

because he suspected it would not be received as a mere facet of his Being. Instead, it would be the sole definer of what he was and what he brought to the class. Essentially, he was denied, and denied himself, the opportunity to be seen as an *intersectional* being. The corresponding effect was that the circumstance made it difficult for Eddy to construct a space where the students could *also* be complex, intersectional Beings; i.e., he could not lead them to a place he could not find himself. What would it have looked like if he or his students could have expressed their sexual and religious identity in tandem? How might educators learn to reach “intersectional” space when its development is resisted by dominant norms? Might it have been possible to see even a “single” social identity such as religion as something that can be queer and complex?

The issue, of course, is that Eddy was not able to cultivate or express complexity in the interplay between sexual and religious identities, because there was no place for it. And without a place, it could not exist. The phenomenological concept of metaphoric place vis-à-vis marginalized identity is raised in the groundbreaking work on intersectionality by Crenshaw (1991). She suggests that it is those complex identities that weave into and out of each other that are the most difficult to tell, because they lack a “location” from which to speak:

When the practices expound identity as “woman” or “person of color” as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a *location that resists telling*. My objective here is to *advance the telling of that location* by exploring the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of color. [emphasis added] (p. 1242)

Crenshaw’s analysis of social justice requires a “telling of that location” where the telling experiences the most resistance. And in the examples set forth by Crenshaw and Eddy,

that place is the intersection of overlapping social identities. I wish to add one more dimension to that location: the overlapping intersections within a “single” social identity such as religious identity. It is in this often-overlooked location that I believe “queer” and “intersectional” meet.

The experience of religious conversion and intensification creates an identity that has silence permeating the air, because of the omnipresent pressure to see a “single” identity as single; i.e., where, for example, “Christians” are all simply Christian without variety, etc. I compare the religiously queer experiences of my participants to Crenshaw’s definition, not to minimize the dehumanizing effects of having to “choose” between two identities (as though they were in competition), but to further define the complexity of intersectionality itself with the data from my own research. In the case of being religiously queer, when one identity is comprised of many previous identities (brought forward in Deweyian continuity), the sense of having to choose is not between identities (e.g., inter-identity as in Black and Woman), but between being considered “real” or “not real” (a situation where having intra-identity mixing renders someone as tainted or impure). I suspect this would have happened in Eddy’s classroom where a “real” Christian (speaking the popular discourse surrounding same-sex sexuality) engages those Christians who espouse difference, variety, and multiplicity and are, therefore, “unreal” in the larger social meta-narrative. Though the distinction may seem semantic, I submit that these two levels of intersectionality (inter-identity and intra-identity) mutually feed and reconstitute each other.

Having described the place of being religiously queer vis-à-vis intersectionality, it begs the question: What happens in this location? How is it understood or experienced in

general and in education? Is there advice I might give Eddy, my colleague and friend, regarding the “telling of that location” from the role of an educator? To answer these questions, I first must notice the nuanced language that Crenshaw uses above. She says that “practices” of identity “relegate” the overlap of two social identities into a location that “resists telling.” This is clearly a location, a place that is *a priori* hostile to the complexity that is forced there, because it “resists” the telling of its contents.²³ This is a carceral location, metaphorically akin to a prison that keeps multiplicity (and embedded queerness) in lockdown. It stands to reason that a proactive education rooted in social justice first requires the resistance to the heinous act of *relegation*.

But what is “relegation?” What is happening in this act and who are the actors involved? The word “relegate” implies two separate places (from and to) and an action between those places. It comes from the Latin word *relegare*, with the simple, and apparently neutral, original meaning “to send.” But “to send” necessarily implies the power to force this action, and etymological tracing of its common usage over time confirms this more hostile meaning to include “sending into exile, consigning to obscurity, and to refer for decision.” This place that “resists telling” is now much more visible and comprehensible, because the place is designed as punishment: “exile,” “obscurity,” and a place upon the guilty are judged “for decision.” It is precisely this *lack* of figurative movement that raises another term to describe the place of relegation (and a term commonly used in educational settings): to fix. The term “fix” comes from the Latin *fixus* meaning “to make firm or stable, to place in a definite position or state,” (where the

²³ By extension, I recognize that if either identity described by Crenshaw can also be understood as multiple and queer, its contents are relegated to this hostile location.

plural *figere* also means to “fasten”). And Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2003) warn that education has a history of creating this hostile place for those who do not neatly fit into simple identity categories:

Fixing is such a dangerous enterprise. It seeks to eradicate difference; but it also eliminates openings and possibilities, especially the unhesitant, grotesquely self-certain fixing we have come to expect from many educational psychologists in our respective professions. “Fixing” has a dark, colonial shadow that educators do not always acknowledge. (p. 43)

Taken together, the hidden voices of complex identity are held in a “definite position or state” where their fate is to be “exiled” or rendered “obscure” and out of view. Is it any wonder that Crenshaw seeks to tell of this location as an act of social justice? And though Crenshaw’s word choice is clearly apt for her subject matter, I also find it appropriate for the phenomenon of religious conversion and intensification as well. My participants experience the kind of relegation (exile, obscurity, and referred for decision) and fixity that Crenshaw describes. Juanita, Art, Wolf, and Henrike each provide (often literal) moments that convey the broader description of relegation of their religious identities, while Ben also conveys a literal and figurative understanding of his fixed place in this country and at his university:

Exile

So the impact... was so very far-reaching from that moment on I did not live at home. I ran away from home for the very, in fact, I was living away already because I had run away from them but this made it very official. I would not go back home at all -- until I was married to my husband and I went back home only to take care of my mother... but this ended my entire relationship with the entire family. (Juanita)

Obscurity

We [friends] would end up having conversations that I think were either political or religious or wherever but it

got to the point where the position that there was no God but that God was the creation of humans became something I couldn't refute logically. And it would end up where literally somebody would say, "So do you agree now that there is no God?" I would end up saying, "I agree," and under my breath I would say, "I don't agree." (Art)

What I say now is if anybody asks me if I'm a Christian, I say, "I believe that Jesus is God, and I try to follow his teachings." (Wolf)

Referred for decision

I was stunned. I was actually quite shocked, because I was not feeling very good in those days about the whole – I was seriously just kind of sharing. I felt I was sharing something: my emotions. And I was like, "Well, wow." You know, "That's your reaction?"...Like, kind of disclose something, and you're like, "Fwishhhh" [with a hand gesture of sweeping away]

Fixed

I must sit idly while the government promotes religion through things like the National Day of Prayer and the graduation invocation. (Ben)

Each of these examples of *relegare* convey a sense of resignation to the situation, because no easy path is seen out of the place of relegation. But the contrast to *relegare* is a familiar term: *educare*, meaning "to draw out." Can it be that education, in and of itself, is the antithesis of the hostile oppression of relegation of identity? What is it that education does, and that Eddy could have done, to make identity less concrete and certain?

Educare is that which undertakes Crenshaw's mission to "advance the telling of that location." I strictly take notice that it is not direct telling of that location. Rather, advancement is a mutual process of drawing and being drawn. Said another way, *in educating others about oneself, one is also drawn out of the place of relegation*. My participant Mary is a perfect example of this humble form of social justice advocacy and

self-advocacy. Her religiously queer identity is liberated when she tells others about her own experiences among Protestant and Catholic Christians:

So I find myself... *moving between worlds*. It would be the first of many times that this would happen to me. Maybe the worlds would be different with this idea of living, having a foot in each one and somehow being a go-between, so I could talk about well, *let me tell you something* about what the Protestants really think on this side, and *let me tell you something* about what the Catholics really think. [emphasis added] (Mary)

In telling about the location she has experienced, Mary educates others, but also “draws out” her own Being (akin to “movement between worlds”) into openness as she draw upon that experience.

Ultimately, education is an act of social justice, because it advances the telling of one’s place. But what does that mean for Eddy and his class (or other classes and educational circumstances like the one he describes)? Juanita’s story reveals the one piece that was missing: Eddy himself, his *full* Self. She says:

I went to see this instructor who was really my third grade instructor – and she then told me I had found my path. Now I needed to follow it and she encouraged me to do so but she also said whatever choice I made *I need to understand that the perception of God as I now believe is what she believed* and she did not want to influence me in that direction but she felt that whatever path I took I was going to find whatever spiritual belief would last me until my death. [emphasis added] (Juanita)

Juanita had a crucial moment that changed her life that involved an educator concerned with the telling of location. That moment was only possible, because Juanita’s teacher created a place for *herself* that also created a place for Juanita. It stands to reason that a teacher needs to construct *a priori* an educational space in which he or she can be fully

present, fully human in order to create that same place of *educare* (the antithesis of *relegare*) for others.

Seeing many in one. Having now arrived at a place where I can understand identity as having multiple “inter-” and “intra-” dynamics, how can I make use of that in an actual class or dialogue setting? How might I bring up these incredibly heady ideas of intersectionality and complicated lived experiences of religious queerness among actual students? Crenshaw (1991) provides an idea that I would like to bring about pedagogically. In asking me to “reconceptualize” the fundamental way I approach identity, I take her challenge seriously:

We first recognize that the *organized identity groups in which we find ourselves are in fact coalitions*, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed. In the context of antiracism, recognizing the ways in which the intersectional experiences of women of color are marginalized in prevailing conceptions of identity politics does not require that we give up attempts to organize as communities of color. Rather, intersectionality provides a basis for re-conceptualizing race as a coalition between men and women. [emphasis added] (p. 1299)

The idea of identity as a coalition is fascinating, because it creates a starting point in intergroup dialogue that is often conceived of as an endpoint or goal: coalition-building for action. Yet, the initial difficulty I see in having students think about coalitions is that the term “coalition” is often given over to a politicized flavor (that of social action) that not all students share (and certainly not at first). Phenomenology offers a similar alternative as a starting place that does not necessarily connect a “shared-ness” of identity with immediate action. Instead, I would offer the insight that Casey (1993) brings to his rendering of “cohabitancy” as a place to start a dialogue of goodwill with good faith

effort. Casey elaborates the connection between cohabitancy and *educare*'s goal of creating a place for student identity:

Alienated we are in many ways—so lost in space and time as to be displaced from place itself—but the existence of *pictorial and narrational journeys* to and between places reminds us that we are not altogether without resources in our placelessness. When the resources of *re-implacement and cohabitancy are drawn upon as well, we find ourselves back on the road to a resolute return to place...* The sense and sensitivity offer a viable alternative to being and feeling out-of-place... At the end of this journey, we shall know once more, perhaps for the very first time, what it means to get back into place. [emphasis added] (p. 310)

Casey's quote reminds me that even my own research process was very fruitful in creating a place where people could explore how their complicated identities permeated each other in a cohabitating way. "Pictorial and narrational journeys" become a resource that connects people through lived experience by giving them two "resources" that resist the *relegare* of traditional identity conceptions: "re-implacement" to the visible center and "cohabitancy" where coalitions can be built once place is established. Once based on the groundwork of lived experience, it becomes difficult (though not impossible) to deny the implicitly cohabitated nature of identity before resistance arises.

But what should I do with the student who resists even the less politicized approach of cohabitancy? From where might that resistance arise? I believe that resistance may find its roots even within the concept of cohabitancy, because a re-imagining of identity reveals the underlying fear that identity (no matter how I prepare or sweeten the news) is always a social construction. Bauman (1992) describes the mirror image of cohabitancy when he declares that our postmodern condition was one where people clung to "imagined communities," despite their unmoored or empty nature:

Communities are imagined: belief in their presence is their only brick and mortar, and imputation of importance their only source of authority... What it lacks in stability and institutionalized continuity, it more than compensates for with the overwhelming affective commitment of its self-appointed “members.” In the absence of institutional support, the commitment tends to be fickle and short-lived. At the moments of condensation, however, it may reach literally breath-taking intensity... Seeking an authority powerful enough to relieve them of their fears, individuals have no other means of reaching their aim except by trying to make the communities they imagine more authoritative than the communities imagined by others—and this by heaving them into the center of public attention. (pp. xix-xx)

It strikes me that there will invariably be those students who resist a pedagogy of cohabitancy (or coalition) of identity, because it reveals the truth that Bauman brings forward. Namely, these students may fear the revelation that their understanding of truth is not based in something firmly and unequivocally “real,” thereby relegating them also to that place that resists telling. In other words, to cohabit identity necessarily means that our original, single identities are “imagined.” I can see why that would be resisted.

Earthquakes under a psychic home. One final insight I wish to bring forward has to do with the encounter Eddy had with his White, male, Christian student and the sense that this student was “backed into a corner.” Having facilitated numerous dialogues on every topic, I recognize this student as a sincere representative of other students who have populated each and every one of my own dialogue classes. Like Eddy, I wish to strike a balance between providing space for *myself* as a person with a religiously queer background, those *other students* who may have similarly complicated identities, and the *students who resist* the entire dialogue experience as scary and disruptive.

First, I am clear that I do not wish to re-define the meaning and purpose of intergroup dialogue or to shy away from controversy around the nature of reality or identity in the name of classroom peacekeeping. I am firmly committed to the idea of dialogue as Freire (2000) describes:

True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporarily without fear of the risks involved. (p. 92)

From my vantage point, I am drawn to the Freirean notion of dialogue as something involving “critical thinking” and “solidarity between the world and the people.” Yet, I suspect that the last line of this quote would raise an eyebrow among first-time participants in dialogue. After all, I may be comfortably able to immerse myself in dialogue “without fear of the risks involved,” but can I truly say that everyone in the room is ready to jump in that risky immersion with me? What could I do with Eddy’s student that he has not already tried? How do I humanely and ethically teach students who resist education out of rational fear? After all, I agree with Freire that dialogue has “risks involved.”

The most obvious risk of dialogue has to do with the fact that the curriculum is intentionally designed to destabilize one’s worldview (where destabilization is not to let someone fall, but to give an embodied sense of complexity). O’Reilly (1998) explains why this destabilization (which she calls “internal division”) is necessary:

Internal division, however painful, forces us to refigure the world. Our inner “diversity issues” challenge our

colleagues as well, because they have to deal with us and expand their own definitions of what's real. (pp. 33-34)

Destabalization provides the necessary opening to other people where the definition of reality is transformed to include new data, because students come from a contextualized whole (e.g., their parent's psychic house) into an environment that questions and problematizes who they think they are. But that new data may be experienced as a torrential hail storm on the flimsy roof of someone's psychic "home." What would it mean to have dialogic data arrive as an earthquake under one's home? And inside that home, would it not make sense to hide in a corner until the storm passes? If the storm or earthquake are especially powerful, what happens if the psychic house is swept away or left in ruins? Are we leaving students "homeless?" I do not think any student will *initially* thank me for shattering their illusions, despite the gains in critical thinking.

Understanding the phenomenology of how a person inhabits a home and/or a corner gives insight into why exploratory dialogic education can be so upsetting. Casey (1993) makes clear the intimate connection of the how it is that people come to feel "at home" and the stability it provides Being by exploring its antithesis, "moving among places." Casey says:

More than comfort is at issue in the elective affinity between houses and bodies: *our very identity is at stake*. For we tend to identify ourselves by—and with—the places in which we reside... When we are moving among places in an exploratory manner, we are acutely aware of not having a place to be; however efficient and successful our voyaging may be and however many places we discover, we remain essentially homeless. For we are then between shores and between destinations, *somewhere else* than home, not "settled in." If we can be said to dwell en route, this is dwelling-as-wandering. [emphasis in original] (pp. 120-121)

Casey's quote is plain in its implications for an exploratory education, because he suggests that anything that asks someone to leave home is also asking that person to place his or her identity "at stake." It is also clear that the goals, though virtuous, do not mitigate the sense of dwelling "somewhere else" in the exploratory journey that is education. Does this mean that education should avoid creating this dwelling-as-wandering experience? The answer is "no," and the reason for it lies in the idea of how home operates in our Being.

Casey also suggests that dwelling spaces are an interplay of the metaphoric influences of Hestia (goddess of the hearth and home) and Hermes (a god of public spaces). As a Hestial space, Casey suggests that it is the very nature of the home that creates a circular inwardness or self-centeredness that obviates the need to engage with difference, a flaw in the Being of home that needs to be corrected as a challenge of moving from adolescence to adulthood. Casey elaborates:

Any built place that aims at encouraging Hestial dwelling will therefore tend to be at once centered and self-enclosed. The implicit directionality will be from the center toward the periphery and will thus obey the architectural counsel to "extend inner order outward." (p. 133)

Home spaces completely support our sense of dwelling and comfort, but they also have an edge that reinforces parochialism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia. As homes are "self-enclosed," they naturalize an order of Being for those who dwell within. As long as the persons never leave the home, order is preserved and harmony reigns. The issue is that the order within the home also creates a "directionality" of order and expectation that is "extended outward." That is the dynamic which educators bump up against when trying to expose students to new ideas or new ways of Being. It is not the home *per se* that is the

issue, but rather the expectations that are permeated through the consciousness of the student as universal and omnipresent.

And what is the experience of being backed into a corner? What would I tell Eddy about his encounter with his White, Christian male student? Casey (1993) adds one more insight into the experiences of this student. While dwelling on the phenomenological aspects of his study, Casey reveals a singularly important point about corners: “I am literally cornered and have only one possible exit” (p. 115). The point is that the corner is not the source of angst for the student, but rather the sense that there is only “one possible exit.” In the example of Eddy’s classroom where a student is feeling cornered, the exit is obscured, because Eddy and the other students are opaque to this one student. Their motivations and complexities are not visible, because no space has been created to make that revelation possible. The irony is, of course, that attempting to create safety for a class by occluding identity only reinforces the opaqueness across individuals that makes safety impossible. In that circumstance, everyone (including teacher and student) is in a corner.

While it is true that dialogic education means to create doubt in what students may have known or believed in the past, it is also true that resistance is an inevitable part of the process. From Casey’s examples above of home and corners, it makes sense that the way to address resistance is to provide *ample* space, because one cannot resist space. Space invites dwelling and creates possibilities. The cure for resistance is *space*. It is precisely the *space*, not the educator, that creates a situation where a student can “leave home” willingly and find the experience to be worthwhile. I accept the fact that educators often shatter perceptions of the world and have a responsibility to attempt to reconstruct something from the deconstruction. Leaving a mess is not acceptable. But it does not

stand to reason that building another “safe” home is the answer. Instead, I seek to rebuild a worldview that loves the freedom that comes from venturing *out* into the world *as it is*.

Students free themselves. I want to create an educational experience where my students feel comfortable in the world, because I know that they will one day be engaged with difference at a time when I will not be present. If I have imbued them with the skills to move out on their own, I will have been the lighthouse to which Campbell and Moyers (1988) allude when speaking of good educators. They say: “All a teacher can do is suggest. He is like a lighthouse that says, ‘there are the rocks over here, steer clear. There is a channel, however, out there’” (p. 150). When it comes to issues of identity, religion, meaning-making, and the future of a human being, is this not the most ethical stance I can take?

I am cognizant, however, that a pedagogy that involves the serious engagement of life’s most daunting issues often appears to ask educators to step in and speak more directly. Doll (2000), however, questions this seductive choice. When quoting from the story *The Wolf’s Eyelash*, she raises the question of what a pedagogy of serious engagement would look like? What questions would it ask? How involved should that educator be in directing decisions on life’s most pressing questions? Does a lighthouse “do” enough in this circumstance? Citing Estés (1997), Doll (2000) writes:

It is like the story “The Wolf’s Eyelash,” which teaches the right question: not where is the next food, the next fight, the next dance, but “where is the soul?” The answer: out in the woods. What would a pedagogy of the woods entail, I wonder? Getting lost. (Doll, p. 209; Estés, p. 368)

The answer to this puzzle has everything to do with the process an educator undertakes to implement “getting lost.” With deeper understanding of the complexities of religious

identification, I add some detail to Doll's account. First and foremost, Doll never suggests that students should get lost *alone* or without someone who can guide them out of that state of being lost. My own pedagogy of the woods would ask me to take students to a place where the exploration of their identities may, indeed, be a lost place. But ethically, I should have walked these woods before. The second goal, then, is to make sure that the experience of being lost should not be so overwhelming that it becomes debilitating. Rather, their observation of my own calm (giving space to resistance) is a clue that I am confident in their own abilities to find their way. Having conquered the mysteries of the woods, I find it unlikely that they will retreat to the illusions of their childhoods. As I employ this pedagogical approach, I believe that the exploration of identity is properly held in a container that is not perfectly "safe," but is also not so daunting that education ceases. It balances the didactic approach of a "religious" education with a more holistic, memetic approach to identity that Anzaldúa (1987) suggests is the way out of a never-ending cycle of violence and oppression:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity... She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (p. 79)

I end the engagement of religiously queer identity with Anzaldúa, because she embodies the lived experiences of my participants and gives it language. For she is not simply a *mestiza* (a Spanish racial term for people of Spanish/European and indigenous ancestry). Anzaldúa is a *new mestiza*, meaning a hybridized identity with a crucial, additional ingredient: it is infused with the light of Freire's *conscientazao*. This is what my

participants and my research brings to the education, a process whereby everyone can grow from the experiences of liminality, continuity, hybridity, re-implacement, cohabitation, and consciousness. To add the experiences of religious conversion and intensification into dialogic pedagogy is to recreate the soul of education.

Exeunt: Explicit Incipit Revisited

It seems impossible to believe that I arrive at the conclusion of my research project. After exploring the phenomenon of religious conversion and intensification, I find that I have a deeper understanding of my own religious identity and what I bring, as a full human being, to classes I teach. Additionally, I have always known that a good educator will attempt to create “firm ground” and keep “soft nuance” in the process. Yet prior to this process, I wondered whether education could truly ever “touch” religion, religious identity, and notions of truth in school. I *explicitly* come to a conclusion that it is possible and necessary to do so.

As I move forward from here, I enter a new *incipit* journey where I bring what I have learned to my work. My future dialogues and classes will resonate with the question Campbell and Moyers (1988) pose for me:

And the crucial question here, as I see it, is simply: With what society, what social group, do you identify yourself? Is it going to be with all the people of the planet, or is it going to be with your own particular in-group?... Some speak only of the interests of this in-group or of that, this tribal god or that. Others, and especially those that are given as revelations of the Great Goddess, mother of the universe and of us all, teach compassion for all living beings. (p. 182)

These are the questions I cherish as defining the content of a person, not isolated unto him or herself, but in full connection with others. I end this thought with the words of my

participants, because they have educated *me* about religious identity and the way the spirit can move through us all.

The Educator Educated

When I am tempted to scoff
 I'm not completely appalled that people would believe
 (Henrike)

When I doubt the veracity or wisdom of my own religious
 experience
 Whatever gets you that connection (Wolf)

When the evening news insists to me that religion is
 bankrupt and has forfeited good
 Religion and spirituality played a very big part in this
 healing process (Juanita)

When religiously motivated politicians try to take away my
 rights or my dignity
 It's to be able to go where I choose (Art)

When my family or friends do not understand what I do or
 what I believe
 I can relate... that's still the connection (Junior)

When the work of social justice becomes very difficult
 I really found consolation in interfaith work (Mujahid)

When I feel afraid that I will not fit in
 Don't you know that oil and water don't mix? I was the
 salad dressing, baby (Mary)

When obstacles are placed in my path
 On my own terms no matter what anyone else says (Karen)

When I wonder if I am truly making a difference
 Coming to the same place that God wants you to be
 (Theresa)

When my faith in the next generation falters
 And I'm still changing now (Ben)

Thank the Heavens. And with gratitude, their words renew me and speak me into Being.

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INVITATION

Dear Participant:

Thank you for your interest in being a part of my research process. The topic of this research explores the nature of religious conversion, broadly defined. To conduct this research, I require participants who are willing to engage in a series of activities over a four month period that will take approximately eight hours. You should expect to:

- Participate in an initial audiotaped conversation with me (lasting approximately one to two hours) on your experiences of religious conversion.
- Engage in a written, reflective assignment based on our conversation.
- Participate in a second audiotaped conversation with me (lasting approximately an hour).
- Engage in a second written, reflective assignment based on our second conversation.
- Lastly, participate in a group conversation with me and other study participants (lasting approximately two hours).

To the extent possible, protecting your privacy, confidentiality, and identity are paramount to me. To maintain safety in the research process, I will do the following:

- All of the conversations will be audiotaped, transcribed and forwarded to you for verification of content and intention.
- When the research project has been completed, all audio files and transcripts will be destroyed.

Finally, your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate and you can end your participation at any time without penalty. You may also decline to answer any question I ask during our conversation.

If the above is agreeable to you, you will be asked to sign and date a consent form at our first meeting. By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in this research project. I look forward to working with you. If you have any questions that I can answer, please contact me at brimhall@umd.edu or 301.996.3163.

Sincerely,

Mark Brimhall-Vargas, Ph.D. Candidate
Educational Policy Studies, University of Maryland

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Date

1 of 2

Project Title	Seeking Personal Meaning in New Places: The Lived Experience of Religious Conversion
Why is this research being done?	This is a research project being conducted by Mark Brimhall-Vargas at the University of Maryland, College Park, under the direction of Dr. Francine Hultgren. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you have identified yourself as someone who has undergone a religious conversion. The purpose of this research project is to investigate the human lived experience of religious conversion, broadly defined.
What will I be asked to do?	The research process will take place over several months, and the procedures involve two individual interviews (one-on-one) and a group interview. There will be written reflection activities to do in between the meetings. Mark Brimhall-Vargas will conduct this interview at a time and location that is mutually convenient to the participant and the investigator. Each interview should last about one to two hours. The interview will be conversational in nature and will explore the specific experiences of the participant during his or her religious conversion. All meetings will be audio taped. The interviewer will take hand written notes. The topics for each of the meetings will be those experiences of religious change (broadly defined as movement to or from a religion, a loss of faith, a firming of faith, etc.) Sample questions: What are some of your childhood memories of religion? What attracted you to your current religion?
What about confidentiality?	We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. However, the research involves making several audiotapes of you. This tape is to ensure accuracy of transcription of information. We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, the information will be transcribed and maintained in a file within a locked cabinet in the investigator's home. Only the investigator will have access to this file. The electronic file will be password protected on a computer that is only accessible to Mark Brimhall-Vargas. In addition, the case study will protect the identity of the participant by using your first name only or providing a pseudonym. Specifically, your full real name will not be used. All data, audio tapes, notes, and transcripts will be destroyed at the completion of the research project. If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. ☐ I agree to be audio-taped during the study. ☐ I do not agree to be audio-taped during the study.
What are the risks of this research?	There are no anticipated risks of this research.
What are the benefits of this research?	This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about religious identification and orientation toward intergroup dialogue. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how religious conversion occurs. The benefit to the participant will be in developing a greater reflexive understanding of his or her own experience through contact and conversation with the researcher. Additionally, every participant will receive a copy of the final product to see how their stories and experiences influenced the research.
Do I have to be in this research?	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop

May I stop participating at any time?	participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.
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Consent Form	Date	2 of 2
What if I have questions?	This research is being conducted by Mark Brimhall-Vargas under the direction of Dr. Francine Hultgren from the Department of Educational Policy Studies (EDPS) at the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Hultgren is the primary researcher conducting this research. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact: Mark Brimhall-Vargas 2703 Cheverly Avenue Cheverly, MD 20785 301.996.3163 phone brimhall@umd.edu email Dr. Francine Hultgren Department of Educational Policy Studies University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742 301.405.4562 phone fh@umd.edu email If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678 This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.	
Statement of Age of Subject and Consent	Your signature indicates that: you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.	
Name		
Signature		
Date		

APPENDIX C: INDIVIDUAL REFLECTIVE ASSIGNMENT

Before our next interview, please take the time to reflect on your story of religious identity conversion in relationship to one or more of the following prompts:

- What have been the *subtle* impacts of your religious conversion on a relationship with a family member or friend?
- What new experiences or wisdom would you not now have without having undergone this conversion?
- What tensions have you experienced in revealing this change of identity to others (those who are close to you and/or acquaintances or even strangers)?
- If *one tenet* of your religion/faith were actually proven to be false, how would that impact your overall religious experience, identity, or perspective?

This reflection does not necessarily need to be written, though it can be. In lieu of a written journal of some sort, you could record your reflections on a digital recorder, or create an artistic piece that illustrates your reflection, etc. This reflection must be completed by June 7th, 2010. Once completed, contact me via e-mail (brimhall@umd.edu) or phone (301.996.3163) so we can arrange for you to get the reflection to me in the manner most well suited to the style of reflection you choose to undertake.

APPENDIX D: SPIRIT MAP GROUP ASSIGNMENT

This exercise is designed to give you an opportunity to reflect on your past experiences (writ large) to examine the messages you have received about religion and spirituality. Your task is to create a “map” of your life up to this point. This map should do the following:

1. It need not be linear, but it should illustrate the details of your past.
2. It will likely highlight those memories or experiences that made a significant impression on you, but please dig deeper to those messages that seem invisible and omnipresent.
3. It should be able to convey the map of your life *without you having to significantly narrate it*; i.e., make use of pictures AND words.
4. It is okay to include items that are contradictory to each other or create a sense of confusion and paradox.
5. The focus of the map is religion and spirituality, but those messages may have come through other identity experiences (such as race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, etc.). When in doubt, feel free to add it.
6. It should clearly illustrate the NOW of you (and how that is connected to your past experiences). In other words, who are you now or what do you think/believe now... and where might that be anchored in your past?

There is no right or wrong way to do the map. There is never enough time to do the map, because more details will always come to mind. And most important of all, this map is not you... it is a mere reflection of you. Enjoy and have fun!

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT SPIRIT MAPS

Art

Art

Age 10
Preparing for 1st Holy Communion
Soul = White/Pure
Only blemish = Original Sin.

A Nun creates vision of the Soul.
As we exist we sin causing the Soul to get progressively blacker - Confession makes the Soul White/Pure again.

Post Confirmation c Age 15
Power of Prayer & anointed Holy Water conquers Power of Nature
Fear of strong winds blowing off our house's roof assuaged by appealing to God for protection

c. Age 19 - Exposed to Atheism & Agnosticism
Terminates in loss of faith & rejection of the Divine
Religious values replaced by Humanistic values
Paradoxically I felt "purer"

Science & Knowledge
"Heaven on Earth" and assails religious gobble deegook!!! Again the paradox i.e. my life still lived by the same tenets of Christianity as Ten Commandments minus the reference to God!!!

c. Age 42
Serious car accident and experiencing dead mother & brother also being able to "see" previous historical eras

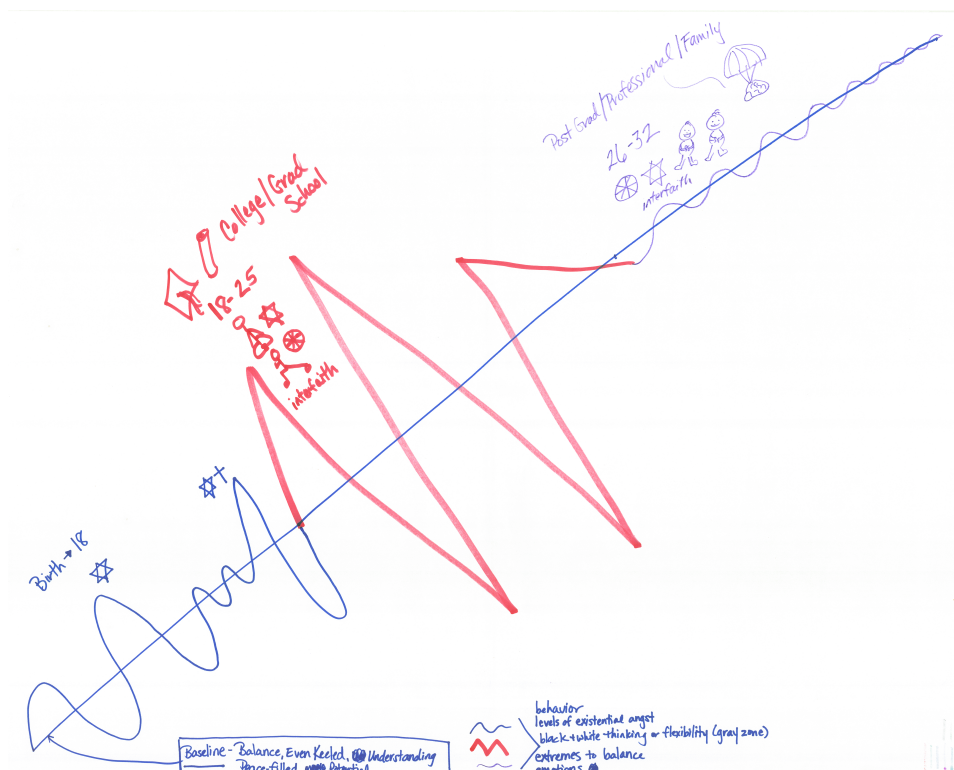
c. Age 23
Returning from climbing the mountain, I go into a church at the foot of the mountain and sit alone in the church and experience great inner peace and restfulness

c. Age 37 & c Age 40
Introduction to Homeopathy lays basis for a return to wonderment and ultimately a move away from the certainty of atheism
Birth of 1st child. Wonderment of life, growing and inheritance of family traits. Also exposure to alternative healing methods/approaches leads to greater openness of spirituality

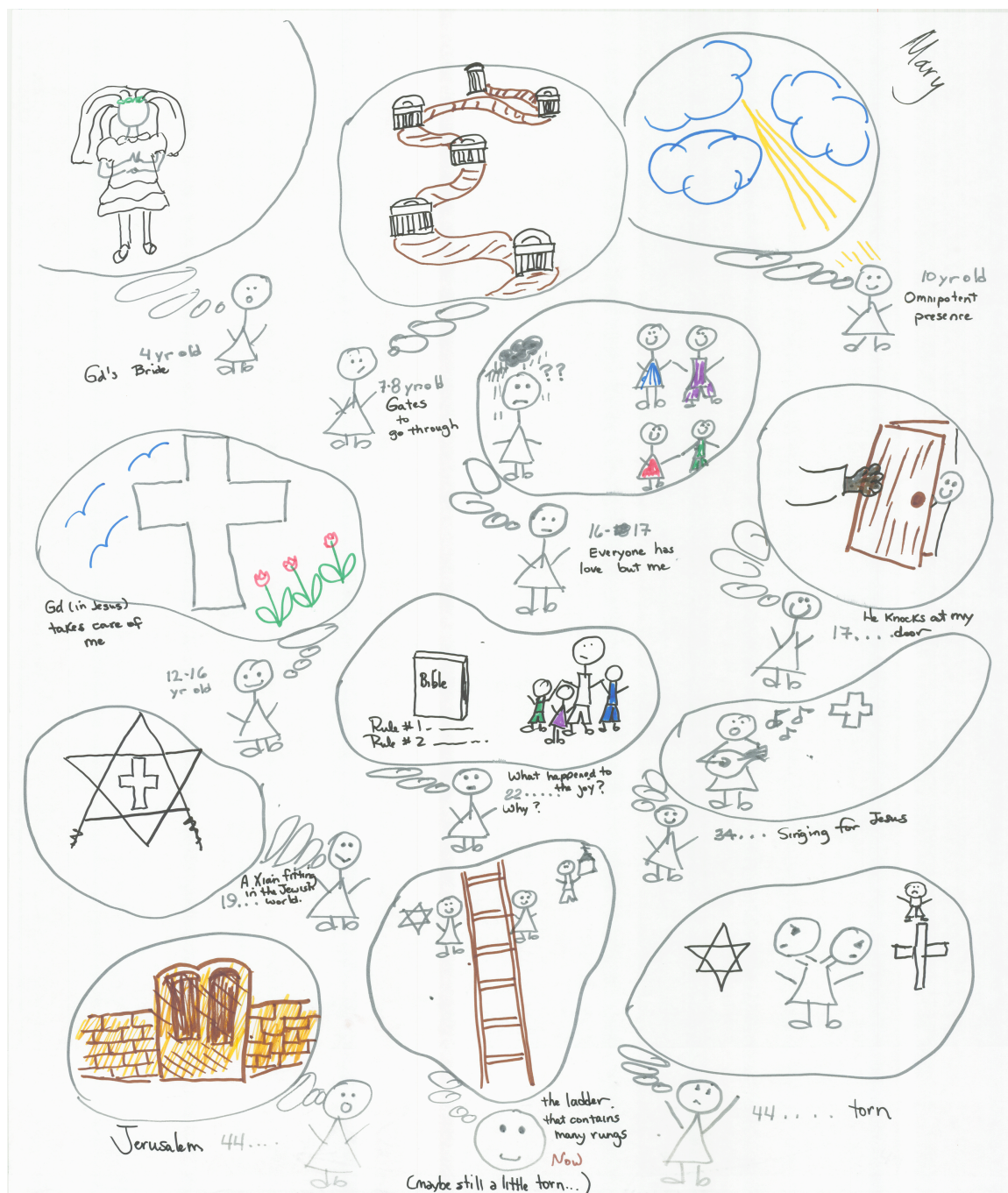
Juanita



Karen



Mary



Wolf



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