

**IN RELATIONSHIP:  
AN ILLUSTRATED AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF COUNSELLOR IDENTITY  
DEVELOPMENT**

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2008

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### **Abstract**

Counsellors undergo a unique process of identity development. Previous research shows that the therapeutic alliance and the therapists' use of self have greater impact on therapy outcomes than the specific techniques used. Thus, counsellor development involves integrating new skills, knowledge, and theory with a more in-depth knowledge of self and others resulting in a qualitative change in the self of the counsellor. The creation of this blended personal-professional identity is often accompanied by anxiety, insecurity, and distress.

Previous research has focused on improvements to educational programs and supervision practices aimed primarily at educators and researchers. This thesis was written by and for the beginning practitioner with the intent of adding a personal dimension to the existing research. Evocative autoethnography was used to explore counsellor development from an affective, relational, and intimate perspective with the hope of both normalizing and celebrating a powerfully transformative experience.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Counsellor development involves a unique and intense learning process, when compared with other professions. Because of the interpersonal nature of the work, the self of the therapist becomes one of the primary tools used and developed, resulting in an intermingled personal-professional identity (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Thus, the identity development of counsellors involves acquisition of skills and knowledge in the development of a professional self and personal development, including experiential and emotional learning. This introduction expands on the idea of the blended personal-professional self and then on ambiguity and affective learning as they relate to counsellors' personal development.

### **Using our Selves**

Numerous sources point to the importance of the self of the therapist to the therapeutic process (Corey, 2009; Fouad, 2003; Orlinsky, Ronnestad & Willutzki, 2004). More specifically, Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) assert that the practitioner's influence on the therapeutic relationship, client change, and therapy outcomes has been "convincingly demonstrated" by previous research (p. 6). Similarly, a meta-analysis of therapy outcomes, conducted by Lambert (1992), indicated that the therapeutic alliance was far more influential than technique. Recent research into client experiences of working with counsellors-in-training suggests that this also holds true for novice therapists; in a recent study, clients responded to and commented extensively on the interpersonal qualities of trainee counsellors (De Stefano, Mann-Feder & Gazzola, 2010). Finally, the importance of the therapist's use of self is increasingly recognized across theoretical orientations (McWilliams, 2004).

Therefore, it is important for counsellors to go beyond applying skills and techniques to incorporate their authentic selves into the work. Fouad (2003) points out that this level of personal involvement may be both challenging and unexpected for new practitioners.

Counsellors-in-training may experience lows in self confidence as they realize that personality and their own unresolved issues can impact their work with others; they may worry that learning to do counselling is more about becoming a “certain kind of person” than developing a certain set of skills (Donati & Watts, 2005, p.479). Likewise, Folkes-Skinner, Elliott, and Wheeler (2010) describe counsellor development as a difficult process of deconstructing and reconstructing the self.

Novice counsellors are in the process of creating a “therapeutic self that consists of a unique blend of the developed personal and professional selves” (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p.507). This process involves integrating new skills, knowledge, and theory with a more in-depth knowledge of self and others; and it results in a qualitative change in the self of the counsellor - a new identity (Stoltenberg, 1981). According to Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992), counsellor identity evolves through a process of individuation in which accumulated knowledge, experience, values, and beliefs are increasingly integrated into practice; a process which may continue throughout counsellors’ careers. Unlike many other professions, the blended personal-professional identity becomes the framework for making clinical decisions (Auxier, Hughes, & Kline, 2003).

### **Living with Ambiguity**

There is a high level of ambiguity and complexity in counsellor training and practice (Corey, 2009). Counsellors use and develop their ‘selves’ to do the work. Yet the self is, “complex, multifaceted, socially embedded, socially constructed, and even illusory” (Donati



& Watts, 2005, p. 481). Counsellors work with diverse populations with often undefined or unrevealed problems and it is impossible to have the knowledge and skill to deal with every possible client and problem before beginning a practicum (De Stefano et al., 2007). In addition, counsellors-in-training may be faced with difficult situations, for instance, the possibility of a client harming themselves or others, in which they must make an immediate decision with limited information (Pica, 1998). While there are many theories available for conceptualizing the issues that clients bring to counselling, most counsellors-in-training have yet to solidly identify with and integrate a theoretical orientation into their practice (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003).

To relate to the complexities of human life and interaction, counsellors need to think differently. “Linear, logical and sequential” ways of thinking are insufficient and it is important to be aware of and accept complexity (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003 p.46; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Furthermore, mastering the basic techniques of counselling also requires acceptance of their ambiguity (Heller Levitt & Jacques, 2005). Take Rogers’ three conditions, deemed necessary for therapeutic change: unconditional positive regard, empathy and genuineness (Corey, 2009). These conditions form the basis of models used extensively in counsellor training (eg. Egan & Shroeder, 2009). It is quite simple to learn how to construct an empathic reflection but how do you learn to *be* an empathic listener? What does it really *mean* to be genuine? How does it *feel* to offer, or be offered, unconditional positive regard? Whether it is in developing skills or relating effectively to clients, learning to tolerate ambiguity is a necessary, but sometimes challenging, aspect of counsellor development (Granello, 2002).

## **Head Learning, Heart Learning**

Hill (1992) describes counselling as both an art and a science. However, the literature suggests that new counsellors enter training seeking the science: concrete skills, knowledge and facts about how to work more effectively with people (Granello, 2002; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Graduate students, in general, have a history of strong academic performance; that is, they are effective at linear, logical, sequential thinking and are able to absorb and integrate information well. While counsellor education does involve learning new facts, theories, and techniques, there is also a significant emotional development component for which many students are unprepared (Furr & Carroll, 2003; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003).

Counsellors are both affected by and work with their clients emotionally. This involves learning to attend to, regulate, and use their emotions purposefully to provide empathy in a professional setting. Furthermore, new counsellors may be unprepared for the emotional demands of moving through the cycle of empathic attachment, involvement, and detachment, experienced with each client (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). This type of learning tends to be experiential and involves significant inter- and intra-personal growth as well as feelings of anxiety and self doubt for new counsellors (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Ronnestad and Skovholt (2003) point to the importance of both engaging cognitively and developing emotional capacity in order to interact therapeutically with clients.

## **Conceptual Lens**

As I prepared to write this section, I read articles on social constructionism filled with multisyllabic words that made my vision blur and my mind turn to more amusing tasks, like what to make for dinner and whether I should first put away laundry or take out the garbage.

I dreaded using those words to pretend I am a philosopher – I am not. The day before yesterday, someone asked me what I believed. I went blank but the question must have been percolating because I woke up this morning reciting the answer in my head; before it could trickle out of my sleepy awareness, I lunged for the pen on my bedside table and scribbled frantically.

Two words came to me (and neither of them was epistemology). What matters to me in this thesis and in my work as a counsellor are story and relationship. Am I a social constructionist? I am not sure. I believe in a solid physical reality that I can touch, feel, and for all practical purposes, know. I am also aware that I see that reality through human eyes and more specifically my eyes, the set of perceptions I have developed as a person embedded within a specific culture, place, time, and family.

I believe in our stories. I don't care if they are objectively true because whatever we tell ourselves about life, self, and others becomes what we live. Swimming in an ocean of cultural, societal, and interpersonal messages, we learn what to tell ourselves through relationships both intimate and diffuse. Stories create meaning, purpose, and identity. People tend to tell their stories in a certain way but creativity and care may bring us to another story, perhaps many other possible stories. Stories are democratic, we all create one, rich or poor, educated or not, powerful or disempowered; the richness of a story doesn't lie in our status. Finally, I am fascinated by the process of storying, full of imagination and therapeutic potential. Through story, I have seen people sculpt something funny or deep or beautiful from a formless lump of pain.

Beyond story, I have a felt sense of something else, something that happens in the telling and hearing of a story. There is a space which can be created around and beneath story

and contained in relationship; a space of intimacy and vulnerability where we touch the self beneath the protective coating of an everyday story. Here, there is a space of raw feeling and unformed meaning; of yearning and reaching out for what we feel we need and perhaps, did not receive. I have the sense that this is a place of repair and possibility where new stories and new ways of being in relationship may be born.

### **Personal Location**

Over the past two years, I have been training as a counsellor. When I started, I was looking for skills that would help me to work more effectively with people and I did become more skillful. What stood out most, however, is not the knowledge or skills I gained but an unanticipated emotional and experiential learning about myself and about the process of counselling. So I find myself immersed in a meaningful experience; a period of change and deepening self awareness which is both exciting and unsettling.

In my experience, the unsettling aspects, the more difficult and anxiety provoking parts of learning, are not often discussed openly by students. Maybe we are competing with each other or just afraid of being alone and vulnerable in our experience. On occasion, both peers and supervisors have shared their vulnerabilities; this was a great relief to me that diminished my fears and helped me open up to this process more fully. I have been inspired by books by Kottler (2010), Yalom (2002) and Pipher (2005) that speak openly and honestly about counselling as a profoundly personal profession.

In writing about the experience of counsellor identity development, I hope to understand it more fully and speak about it more openly to normalize the experience for others. This aim lends itself well to autoethnography as a method; however, the choice to use this method also arises from a personal context. I have been writing and drawing for as long

as I can remember. Boxes of journals and sketchbooks hold the tears, joys, and transitions of my life; the stomach churning thrill of falling in love, the blinding pain of grief and all these mundane little moments in between. In them I see facets of my identity hold steady over years and I feel deflated as I wonder, “What has changed?”

More recently, I have awoken to the possibility that I might just accept these stable bits of me rather than changing them. This autoethnography and the journey of counsellor identity development are both acts of self acceptance and processes of discovering and storying those and other facets of self into a new context, a new identity. But that’s all very intellectual, there is something else calling me. I withdraw a journal from the box; it’s old, spine cracked, pages hung loosely together. On the water-stained cover is a renaissance painting and taped words cut from a magazine. It says, “The world is full of stories, waiting to be told.”

### **Purpose of the Study**

Yalom (2002) refers to two major discourses in counselling and therapy: process and content. Content is the “precise words spoken, the substantive issues discussed” whereas process refers to “the interpersonal relationship” between counsellor and client (p.xvii). Likewise, counsellors integrate both process and content in the formation of an identity. The content of counsellor development includes acquisition of knowledge and behavioural skills which might be equated to development of professional identity (Fontaine & Hammond, 1994). Counsellor development also involves understanding interpersonal processes, in particular, awareness of oneself in relationship. Counselling process is ambiguous, personal and affective and it is understood through experiencing; this type of learning may be unfamiliar to new counsellors and can lead to stress and anxiety but it also holds the potential

for personal growth and transformation (Chang, 2011; Furr & Carroll, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003).

Both personal and professional development (process and content-oriented learning) are essential components of counsellor education; without a basis in skills and theory, process cannot be absorbed (Fontaine & Hammond, 1994). However, the ambiguous and personal half of counsellor identity development evoked strong feelings and reactions in me. The first three chapters of this thesis take a linear, logical format which provides a framework to situate my experience in; the remainder will take a different approach. To relate to the complexity and ambiguity of counselling and counsellor identity development, I intend to take Skovholt and Ronnestad's (2003) advice about thinking differently. I have chosen a creative methodology, which blends art and story to create meaning and to process and share an experience. In this way, this thesis mirrors and continues the journey of integrating head and heart, process and content, personal and professional selves. Ultimately, I hope to offer an in-depth and personal perspective on the process of counsellor identity development.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The unique qualities and challenges of becoming a counsellor have implications for counsellor education and supervision (Furr and Carroll, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Though few studies directly address the identity development of counsellors, a number of lenses have focused on the overall process, while developmental and cognitive models have provided an overarching framework. Research on the process of identity formation also affects counsellor trainees directly. As such, relational and critical incident perspectives have investigated trainee experiences and recently, a more intimate lens has been focused on the lived experience of counsellors-in-training through smaller but in-depth qualitative studies. This literature review traces the ways in which counsellor development has been explored and conceptualized and identifies opportunities to contribute to the body of research on counsellor identity development.

### **Developmental Models**

In general, the developmental models outline discrete, linear stages with feelings of anxiety and dependence prominent in the early stages (Sawatzky, Jevne & Clark, 1994). One of the most often cited, earlier models is Loganbill, Hardy and Delworth's (1982) conceptual model of supervision. The authors reference developmental psychology, specifically stage theories (eg. Erik Erikson; Margaret Mahler), to create a model of counsellor development consisting of three levels (stagnation, confusion, integration) across eight supervisee issues (competence, emotional awareness, autonomy, theoretical identity, respect for individual differences, purpose / direction, personal motivation, and professional ethics). The authors proposed that this model act as a stepping stone for future research and studies have

investigated specific aspects of novice counsellors' development. For instance, Stoltenberg (1998) looks at self-estimates of counselling skill at different levels of experience.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study to date has been Ronnestad and Skovholt's (2003) cross-sectional and longitudinal study of one hundred counsellors and therapists over fifteen years. The authors describe fourteen themes that emerge across the career lifespan, from the beginning lay helper to the experienced professional. Development is conceptualized as cyclical and continuous with similar themes revisited at different phases. Several characteristics of new counsellors are described in detail including feelings of anxiety; uncertainty and fear of evaluation; unrealistic expectations for client change; a lack of conceptual maps to base practice on; and an emerging and fragile professional identity.

### **Cognitive Models**

Cognitive developmental research builds on the developmental stage models, but shifts the focus to understanding how counsellors develop in cognitive complexity as they progress through stages (Borders, 1989; Fong, Borders, Ethington, & Pitts, 1997). Coming from a learning perspective, cognitive models examine what allows counsellors to move from factual to procedural knowledge, in other words, what connects knowing to doing (Furr and Carroll, 2003). According to Fontaine and Hammond (1994), this is a critical gap, involving the integration of both content and process, that most training programs fail to bridge.

Fong et al. (1997) conducted a quantitative, longitudinal study of cognitive development in counsellor trainees. The study followed forty-eight students and lasted for the duration of the master's program. Cognitive development was split into thoughts, cognitive processes, and schemas and these areas were assessed at four intervals during training. They



found changes in discrete thoughts at beginning (didactic learning) stages, followed by more complex client conceptualizations and changes in cognitive processes such as self appraisal, following practicum experiences. Several other studies have also focused on specific aspects of cognitive development. For instance, Borders (1989) investigated the effect of ego development on in-session cognitions. In addition, Leach and Stoltenberg (1997) examined the way attitudes, such as self-efficacy, change over the course of training.

Similarly, Etringer and Hillerbrand (1995) drew on the novice-expert literature to reconceptualize counsellor cognitive development as a change process in which novice counsellors move towards greater expertise through increasingly sophisticated cognitive abilities. The authors identify a number of changes in the organization and recall of knowledge that allow expert counsellors to perceive clients in more complex ways, conceptualize cases, and implement treatment plans more efficiently, and work more effectively in ambiguous and complex situations. Based on the existing research, Morran, Kurpius, Brack and Brack (1995) designed a model of cognitive skill development for counsellor trainees.

As suggested by the developmental models, cognitive models propose that to work with greater depth, counsellors must move beyond skill development. However, the cognitive models suggest that this greater depth will be achieved by developing a stronger, more complex cognitive base (eg. more sophisticated case conceptualization and treatment planning skills) which allows counsellors to work with greater abstraction (Cummings, Haliberg, Martin, Siemon & Hiebert, 1990).

## **Relational Focus**

Much of the learning in counsellor development is experiential and occurs in relationship. In a survey of four thousand therapists, of various experience levels, academic backgrounds and theoretical orientations, interpersonal situations related to practice were identified as the most important influence on development (Orlinsky, Botermans, & Ronnestad, 2001). In this survey, participants indicated that experiences in working with clients, supervision, and their own therapy had all influenced their development in positive ways.

The importance of the supervisory relationship has been recognized by researchers across perspectives as critical to the development of new therapists (eg. Chang, 2011; Fouad, 2003; Gazzola & Theriault, 2007; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). Skills, sense of competence and counsellor identity are all developed within this relationship (Gazzola & Theriault, 2007). In addition to imparting skills and knowledge, the experience of the relationship itself, which may include trust and support as well as challenge, may promote personal growth (Loganbill et al., 1982).

The developmental models assert that supervision is important, at least in part, because new counsellors experience high levels of anxiety and insecurity along with a “fragile” identity (Loganbill et al., 1982; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003, p.50). However, Barrett and Barber (2005) suggest that variability in experience and maturity among trainees does not fit neatly into developmental models; supervisors who do not account for this variability may interact with supervisees in ways which provoke trainee anxiety.

Gazzola and Theriault (2007) performed a qualitative study of ten novice counsellors exploring relational themes in supervision. Participants reported that a more egalitarian relationship promoted openness and reduced anxiety whereas a hierarchical relationship seemed to lead to more guarded behaviour and less authenticity. Supervisors who imposed structure and were viewed as content-focused and inflexible were responded to less positively than those who were more process-focused and responsive to developmental needs. Supervisees were prone to self-blame, insecurity, role confusion, and resistance to supervision with the former and more likely to express their opinions and engage with the latter. On the whole, participants described thriving in positive relationships and a sense of restriction, including anger, frustration and anxiety, in relationships that felt unsupportive.

### **Critical Incidents**

The critical incident approach aims to understand personal and professional events which affect development by acting as a “catalyst for change” (Furr & Carroll, 2003, p. 484). Wong-Willie (2007) bridged the critical incident and relational perspectives with a study of critical incidents which affected doctoral students’ development. The author interviewed five counsellors about incidents which helped or hindered self reflection. Findings revealed that all incidents were interpersonal and centered on themes of trust, openness, safety, support (or lack of) in relationship to peers, supervisors, professors, and administration.

In a larger qualitative study, Furr & Carroll (2003) interviewed eighty-four master’s level counsellors about critical incidents, inside and outside of the counselling program, that affected their development as counsellors. The authors discovered that many influential incidents happened outside the program, reinforcing the link between personal and professional identity. Likewise, change within the program affected participants’ personal

lives. Changes in close relationships outside the program were cited frequently and attributed to changes in participants' interpersonal style of relating. Finally, this study echoed others in suggesting that students felt unprepared for the emotional learning involved and needed support to turn the anxiety associated with self examination into growth.

### **Narrative, Interpretive and Emerging Approaches**

The unique attributes of counsellor development directly affect counsellors-in-training. However, the majority of research on counsellor development has come from the perspective of supervisors or researchers, leaving the supervisee perspective unexamined in favour of an external perspective (Grafanaki, 2010b; Sawatzky, Jevne, & Clark, 1994). Grafanaki (2010a) calls attention to the need to understand the training process and the factors that are meaningful to novice counsellors; she calls for research that is from us not just about us. This might be viewed as a co-construction of knowledge that shifts the power balance between researcher and the researched.

In this vein, Winslade (2002) writes about taking a narrative approach to re-developing a New Zealand counsellor education program. Inspired by feminist and Maori perspectives, program developers chose to challenge the existing, "modernist, rationalist approaches" (p.1) that have dominated counsellor education. Rather than taking an individualistic or stage-oriented stance, the program is based on the social constructivist view that identity is flexible and continually formed in relationship rather than individually created and contained. As such, the program invites students to intentionally co-author their stories of identity development through thinking and skill development in relationship with peers and supervisors.

Chang (2011) interviewed masters-level counsellors to understand how they perceived their development and what meaning they took from the experience; he placed the narrative accounts of eight counsellors-in-training within the context of a developmental framework. Chang found many of the same challenges emphasized by the developmental models (eg. anxiety, insecurity, fear of evaluation) but participants also explored reasons for entering the field including spiritual and meaning-based reasons such as viewing counselling as a calling. In addition, participants revealed that their education had powerful transformative effects; they described increased self acceptance, compassion, awareness, and healthier boundaries. In taking this approach, Chang seems to expand on existing research by touching more at the heart of counsellor identity development.

Qualitative methods have the advantage of looking at fewer participants but with much greater narrative richness and depth. With this in mind, Folkes-Skinner and colleagues (2010) investigated the experience of a single trainee hoping to capture details of the learning process that would be missed by other methods. The authors used a single case study design, interviewing one, masters-level trainee at three intervals during the first twelve weeks of training. This participant described experiences that are congruent with the existing research. Training was perceived as emotionally demanding, involving fluctuating levels of self confidence, and considerable anxiety and self doubt throughout; a strong need for supportive supervision was also identified. The feelings experienced by this single participant are relayed with greater depth than in comparable studies involving many participants. For instance, the participant describes the emotional pain of taking home the stories of a client in distress and her feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy, this takes the reader beyond a description of training as 'emotionally demanding.'

### **Other Voices, Other Listeners**

At the time of publication, Folkes-Skinner et al. (2010) indicate that their article was the only published, single case study on counsellor development. However, Pica (1998) takes a similar approach in writing about his experience as a doctoral student in clinical psychology. Pica chose to write about his experience because of the relief he felt when learning about the feelings and experiences that novice therapists share but which go mostly unspoken. The article focuses on the feelings associated with doing highly ambiguous work and the fact that, in his experience, novices are unprepared for this. Pica writes about the importance, for new therapists, of supporting and validating each other and about the benefits of being mentored. Mentorship can normalize experiences, diminish uncertainty, and allow new counsellors to worry less about being perfect.

Though it appears that research into counsellor development is shifting to give voice to counsellors-in-training, the focus remains almost exclusively on improvements to educational programs and supervision practices aimed at educators and researchers. A few experienced researchers and practitioners have begun to reach out to counsellors-in-training, as an audience, in an attempt to normalize the experience of counsellor identity development. For instance, Skovolt and Ronnestad (2003) write to beginning practitioners with the hope of easing their distress and offering hope for a rewarding professional future.

Pica (1998) contends that, “Articles connected to students’ experiences serve an important function. If only for a moment, they provide validation, clarity, hope in the midst of great anxiety, discomfort and uncertainty” (p. 326). Fouad (2003) echoed this sentiment from the perspective of an educator; she states that reading articles about student experience helped her to recognize and normalize the experiences of her students. Pica asserts that

objective reports and research are given a disproportionate amount of weight, while subjective reports of student experience are not given credit and are not published by mainstream journals; as a result they are never read by students. So, it is primarily literature outside the academic journals that has reached out to trainees as an audience.

A number of experienced therapists have written books that reach out to new practitioners through stories of life and practice. For example, in *On Being a Therapist*, Kottler (2010) takes an honest look at some of the issues that therapists do not often talk about. Some of these issues include, reasons for entering the profession, both altruistic and self serving; issues of power; and how our personal and professional lives may overlap and influence each other, for better and for worse. Along with vulnerability, Kottler reveals a reassuring sense of humanity that says, it is okay to be imperfect because our imperfect humanity allows us to relate to others in a genuine way. Likewise, Pipher (2005) writes a compassionate and richly descriptive set of letters to a young therapist, Laura, in which she relates her experience of the beauty and the pain inherent in this profession. Yalom's (2002) *The Gift of Therapy*, offers down-to-earth, personal and sometimes unconventional advice through a series of short vignettes that engage the heart as well as the intellect. Finally, Sussman (2007) addresses therapists' unconscious motivations for entering the profession, while Pope, Sonne, and Greene (2006), examine myths, taboos, and uncomfortable topics that affect therapists and their clients; these last two books, while relevant to novices, are addressed to practitioners in general.

### **States of Vulnerability and Unknowing**

Regardless of perspective, author or audience, the research reveals common threads in the experience of developing a personal-professional, counselling identity, as Skovholt and

Rønnestad (2003) call it a “practitionerself”(p. 50). As training progresses, counsellors begin looking for ways to ‘be’ but how to ‘be’ as a counsellor is highly variable and individual. Without a concrete model to base a professional self on, novices often experience uncertainty (Granello, 2002). There is a need to draw on and trust one’s own intuition and to balance that with appropriate use of skills, however, new counsellors have a limited base of experience and knowledge to draw on. Students tend to be used to academic models of learning where experts provide the knowledge. This strength can prove challenging when students must rely on themselves as a tool for learning, development, and practice and it may lead to feelings of frustration and anxiety as individuals find themselves having difficulty where they have always been capable (Heller Levitt & Jacques, 2005).

Emotional aspects of learning, which result from increasing self awareness and working with clients may produce feelings of vulnerability and distress. New practitioners often struggle with balancing emotional boundaries in session - either shutting down in the face of intense emotional content or opening up completely resulting in over-identification with the client and taking disturbing thoughts and feelings home (Neufeldt, Kavno, & Nelson, 1996). Not surprisingly, the fresh counselor identity has been described as fragile and characterized by fluctuating moods, from enthusiasm and excitement to shame and despair (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003; Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). Counsellors may have difficulty with feedback at this stage and may experience countertransference related to their inexperience (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003).

The importance of using the self naturally and therapeutically may put considerable pressure on emerging therapists and there is a growing body of research on feelings of incompetence in novice therapists that reveals the ubiquitous nature of these feelings



(Theriault & Gazzola, 2006; Theriault, Gazzola & Richardson, 2009). Feelings of inadequacy contribute to in-session anxiety which diminishes counsellors' ability to focus on their clients that may, in turn, affect the therapist, the therapeutic alliance and therapy outcomes negatively (Heller Levitt & Jacques, 2005; Hiebert, Uhlemann, Marshall, & Lee, 1998). In addition, anxiety may restrict the creativity and flexibility required to work well in complex and ambiguous situations (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003).

Feelings of incompetence are not the only sources of anxiety for counsellors-in-training. Anxiety may be related to academic competition, fear of evaluation, unrealistic expectations about client change, ethical dilemmas in practice, information overload, and loss of trust in the counselling process (Chang, 2011; Heller Levitt & Jacques 2005). In the midst of all this anxiety, there is a call to be fearless in order to meet clients at a useful relational depth (Mearns & Cooper, 2005). So, it seems that novice counsellors must, paradoxically, find a way to hold fear and fearlessness, insecurity and confidence to work with their clients effectively.

### **Reframing**

You hoped that with experience you would - someday - understand how counseling really works, how and why people change, perhaps even come to terms with your own past, present, and future. Bad news. No matter how long you work in this field, you will (hopefully) always remain in a state of awe and wonderment (Kottler, 1993, p. 26).

Kottler suggests that there is another side to all the anxiety and self doubt that seems inherent to forming a practitioner self: that we can find a state of awe and wonderment not in spite of our lack of understanding but because of it. Likewise, in an autoethnography of

songwriting, Carless (2010) suggests that states of vulnerability and unknowing are optimal conditions for creativity. Perhaps if, as new counsellors, we can find the room to hold both fear and fearlessness, embrace ambiguity, and find a sweet spot with just the right amount of tension, then we can grow and practice with creativity.

### **Opportunities**

While counsellor development has been studied from a number of perspectives, it remains a complex subject with many areas left to explore and expand on (Grafanaki, 2010a). Large scale studies and conceptual papers have created useful, comprehensive frameworks for understanding counsellor development (eg. Loganbillet al.,1982; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Smaller-scale studies reveal rich detail and the stories of participants may evoke an emotional response which allows readers to identify with them (eg. Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010).

According to Grafanaki (2010b), research needs to provide a better understanding of the training process and give attention to formative experiences in counsellor training; she suggests there is particular need to look more closely at trainee experience. Likewise, Auxier et al. (2003) assert that theories of counsellor development need to be informed by the actual experiences of trainees. Gaining a better understanding of these experiences and processes may contribute to improvements in counsellor training such that it meets students' needs and limits any possible negative effects including burnout, impairment, or sense of incompetence (Goodyear, Wertheimer, Cypers & Rosemond, 2003; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Theriault, Gazzola & Richardson, 2009). Ultimately, improvements to training may result in more competent practitioners and better quality service to clients (Granfanaki, 2010a).

Despite the importance of this point of view, very little has been written about student experiences from the perspective of students (Grafanaki, 2010a; Pica, 1998). Therefore, my thesis aims to explore the experience of counsellor identity development from a first person perspective. Counselling is affective, relational, and intimate. It is an art and a science that relies on the self of the practitioner connecting with the self of the client. It is non-linear, creative, and ambiguous and carries stories at its heart. Thus, I hope to create a personal piece of research that is congruent with my emerging practice and practitionerself, a story of development meant to engage the reader on an affective level. To embed the art within science, I intend to draw on the existing research as a framework for comparing, contrasting and understanding the development of one new counsellor.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Qualitative Introduction**

There are many ways of asking a question. Broadly speaking, methods of inquiry can be divided into quantitative and qualitative approaches; each providing a distinct and valuable perspective. Both approaches are embedded within historical and philosophical contexts and, therefore, offer alternative perspectives on what constitutes knowledge and truth, and how those truths may be found (Mayan, 2009). The quantitative approach springs from the traditions of positivist science. Within this paradigm, there is a belief that there is one objectively knowable reality that exists outside the self of the researcher. As such, there is a focus on prediction and control in research realized through controlling variables, removing unusual outliers, and seeking to homogenize results into generalizable conclusions (Leavy, 2009). In social science research, this results in advantages, such as being able to apply results to a large number of people. However, there are also disadvantages. For instance, quantitative methods do not tell the reader about the individual lives behind the data. Furthermore, these approaches have been criticized as potentially “sterile” and insensitive to relational ties (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p.2; Ellis, 2007).

Qualitative inquiry questions the relevance of this approach to the social sciences (Mayan, 2009; Neimayer, 1998). In contrast to the focus on a single, knowable, truth, qualitative research allows for the possibility of many valid understandings of a phenomena. Rather than trying to identify and minimize subjectivity in research, those coming from a qualitative perspective aspire towards further integration of the researcher with the research (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2010). Instead of isolating variables in a search for prediction and control, there is acceptance of the ambiguous complexities that arise out of

stories of our lived and interconnected experiences. As such, qualitative research typically focuses in depth on the realities of relatively few people (Mayan, 2009; Muncey, 2010; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2010).

Qualitative research continues to evolve and has diversified into a broad spectrum of practices and methodologies (Mayan, 2009). One method, autoethnography, expands on the qualitative trend towards exploring individuals' stories in depth and recognizes researchers as inextricably involved in their own research by merging the roles of researcher and participant (Muncey, 2010).

### **Autoethnography**

In autoethnography, the researcher examines his or her own life within its sociocultural context. According to Ellis and colleagues (2011), autoethnography combines elements of autobiography and ethnography.

...to take the leap into creating an autoethnography one first has to recognize that there is no distinction between doing research and living a life... Just as a counsellor is both a therapist and a client, the autoethnographer is both the researcher and the researched. (Muncey, 2010, p.3)

Autobiographers often focus on transformative events that cause the author to attend to their lived experience whereas ethnographers study the values, beliefs, relationships, and experiences of a culture (Bochner & Ellis, 1992). Autoethnography stories a transformative experience that happens within the culture the writer is a member of; it moves beyond autobiography by analyzing the personal and intentionally connecting it to culture. This may be done, for instance, by framing the experience within the literature or interviewing other insider members of the culture (Chang, 2011; Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography is a relatively new method but one that is gaining popularity in social science research (Anderson, 2006). It responds to several themes that have emerged in qualitative inquiry such as the need for intuition and emotion in social science (Ellis, 1997); skepticism about the extent to which knowledge is generalizable (Anderson, 2006); the expectation that end users of research will have a voice; and the recognition that sharing a story has a therapeutic effect for participants (Muncey, 2010). Stanley (1993) argues that a subject is deeply known not just by inquiring from a distance but by experiencing it; this is how knowledge is produced. Autoethnographers experience their subject and share that knowledge experientially with an audience.

**Storying in relationship.** “Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact” (McKee as cited in Christensen, n.d.). Individuals are continually engaged in a process of making meaning out of their lives through storying. Autoethnography results in a story, a personal narrative embedded within a particular context, but it is also concerned with how the story is told, in this way it is both product and process. Ideally, the process of storying changes both the teller and the listener. Meaning is drawn from cultural messages and within interpersonal relationships; it is drawn from the story and through the storying (Strong, Pyle, deVries, Johnston, & Foskett, 2008).

Through sharing stories, autoethnography aims to portray the complexity and individuality of people and also to create mutual understanding. In this way, autoethnography moves beyond preoccupation with self and is relational; it seeks to engage the reader and give voice to feelings and experiences which may otherwise remain silent. This methodology often focuses on the experiences of those who are not represented by the dominant

sociocultural narratives; it may look at subjects not typically examined or points of view not typically expressed (Ellis et al., 2011; Muncey, 2010). In its form, autoethnography is also subversive; it blurs the lines between art and science, literature and research, and values the production of a meaningful account over adherence to academic writing conventions (Ellis, 1997; McIlveen, 2008).

Several different forms of autoethnography are emerging and being defined; these place different emphasis on “the study of others, the researcher’s self and interaction with others, traditional analysis, and the interview context as well as power relationships” (Ellis et al., 2011, p.6). Broadly, these forms may be split into evocative and analytic autoethnography.

**Evocative autoethnography.** Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner are key writer-researchers within this genre who contend that autoethnography should be both “aesthetic and evocative” (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011, p.5). The evocative writers tend towards writing from the heart and to the heart through expressive accounts described as “messy” and “vulnerable” (Denzin, 2006, p. 421). These accounts need to engage the reader experientially; they describe thoughts, feelings, and actions and use literary conventions like character and plot development and storytelling to help the reader experience the writer’s experience. Engaging the senses in this way encourages felt knowing, a holistic understanding which moves beyond the head and into heart and body (Ellis, 1997; Ellis et al., 2011).

Ellis (1997) questions the privilege given to the academic, third person voice far removed from feelings and experience; she contends that traditional, academic research and writing has stemmed from a “white, masculine, heterosexual, middle-upper class, Christian,

able-bodied perspective (p. 116).” This perspective values the “cognitive and visual” over the “emotional and sensual”; it places “generalizations and explanations” before “details and understanding” and elevates “telling with authority” over “coping with our vulnerabilities” (p.116).

Different people have different, but equally valid voices. Differences may arise from gender, culture, ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, spiritual, and religious beliefs, etc. (Ellis et al., 2011). Thus, evocative autoethnography embraces many different ways of knowing, forms of expression (eg. poetry, art, performance, dance, and creative writing) and styles of speaking (Strong et al., 2008). In valuing other ways of knowing, research “expands and opens up a wider lens on the world” (Ellis et al., 2011, p.3).

Both Ellis (1997, 2002) and Denzin (2006) point to the importance of concern for others and advocating for social and cultural change in writing autoethnography. Most evocative autoethnography engages on this level either implicitly or explicitly. Ellis (2002) points to Frank’s (1991) narrative of illness; Tillman-Healy’s (2001) exploration of gay-straight friendships, and Ronai’s (1995) connection of sexual abuse to social policy. Even when the connection is implicit, one person’s story helps others to process and talk about their experience and it invites them to take action (Ellis 2002). Furthermore, in putting aside academic language and conventions of objectivity, in showing vulnerability and working to engage the reader, autoethnography becomes a more accessible, unpretentious, and egalitarian form of research (Denzin, 2006). Narrative connects abstract theory and ideas to personal lives and personal lives are at the heart of social change (Ellis, 2002).

While proponents of evocative autoethnography emphasize its connection to social action and interpersonal relatedness, often in response to accusations of self indulgent, navel



gazing, these accounts may also have a therapeutic effect for the writer alone (Ellis, 2002). For example, Pearce (2010) reflects on the therapeutic qualities of writing about losing her mother, Write (2009) processes feelings of dislocation and culture shock through autoethnography, and C. Smith (2004) comments on the healing effect of writing about acquired brain injury. Rather than framing this work as self indulgent, evocative autoethnography has the potential to balance and value the wellbeing and expression of self and others.

**Analytic autoethnography.** While writers like Ellis, Bochner, and Denzin favour autoethnography that speaks to the heart and soul, Anderson (2006) advocates for analytic autoethnography which he describes as a “specialized subgenre of analytic ethnography” (p.388). Where evocative autoethnography blends social science and literature, analytic autoethnography conforms to a more objective, traditional ethnographic stance. This perspective emphasizes the researcher as a group member and the importance of consulting and obtaining data from other group members; it focuses on communicating with the reader through data analysis and contribution to theory over evocative engagement and emotional resonance. According to Anderson, this focus on transcending individual observation and description to draw conclusions about larger phenomena, counters claims of self absorption.

Despite advocating for a less emotional and subversive form of autoethnography, Anderson (2006) recognizes that doing autoethnography requires that the researcher’s personal life is deeply intertwined with his or her research interests and that analytic autoethnographers may not reach this level of personalization. I find myself deeply intertwined with my subject and strongly drawn to the creative potential of evocative autoethnography. Likewise, I resonate with the themes of vulnerability, emotion, empathy,

and subversion expressed in the evocative perspective; they feel familiar to me and have woven themselves through my artist-identity long before embarking on this project.

**Advantages.** Autoethnography has its primary advantage in intimacy. Intimacy allows writer and reader to connect deeply with the subject matter. The writer not only describes a lived experience; he or she **has** a lived experience. This is shared as the writer exposes aspects of him or herself to create emotional attunement with the reader (Anderson, 2006). Academic jargon and ‘telling about’ are set aside to engage the reader with a “uniquely personal meaning and empathy” which has the potential to stimulate “profound understanding” of one story; a story interwoven with others’ stories (McIlveen, 2008, p.5; Strong, et al., 2008). In this interweaving, the writer seeks connection with the reader, so that even when the experience is not shared, we can draw on shared emotions to create understanding.

Anderson (2006) comments on several additional advantages. For instance, autoethnographers have access to information that might otherwise be difficult to obtain and publish. Researchers who are full members of the culture being studied also have access to insider meanings, though meanings will vary due to individual differences. Finally, researchers’ personal intrigue with the subject (thinking about it everywhere from driving to work to taking a shower) may lead to insights that would not otherwise occur.

In terms of counselling research, both autoethnography and counselling are intimate, meaning making processes which move towards deeper understanding of self and others and value emotional connection (Wright, 2009). Both counselling and autoethnography reach out to others, seek to create change through relationship, and recognize diversity as playing an

important role in the work (Strong et al., 2008). Finally, Polkinghorne (2005) notes that the field of psychology has a long history of introspection.

Despite a history of introspection and the alignment of values and practices between counselling and autoethnography, some authors contend that autoethnography has not yet been accepted in counselling and psychotherapy (McIlveen, 2008; Wright, 2009; McIlveen, 2008). Autoethnography has been used to examine a number of topics related to counselling and psychology, for instance, illness narratives (Richards, 2008); eating disorders (eg. J. L. Smith, 2004); and issues of race, class, and gender in community-based research (Langhout, 2006) but very few articles refer to autoethnographies of counselling or counsellors. On the other hand, a number of recent theses have addressed these topics, for example, Munnell Triff (2010) writes about her experience of vicarious trauma as a dance therapist; Lin (2007) writes about the identity development of a drama therapy intern; and Lafontaine (2004) explores her experience of counselling with indigenous youth.

Autoethnography has been criticized as self indulgent and self absorbed (Muncey, 2010); insufficiently involved with others (Buzard, 2003; Delamont, 2009; Fine, 2003); biased and overly personal (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 1997; Gans, 1999); too emotional, therapeutic and aesthetic; and weak in general conventions of the scientific method including theory, analysis and hypothesizing (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011). However, Ellis and colleagues (2011) argue that autoethnography is too often judged by the standards of either art or science; it is either not artful enough or not scientific enough, when, in actuality, it lies somewhere in between. Comparing autoethnography to more traditional, scientific methodologies is like comparing apples and oranges (Denzin, 2006). Autoethnography involves others in different ways; it draws on emotion and intimacy as strengths and makes

no claim to being unbiased. Ellis et al. (2011) contend that there is room to be both “rigorous, theoretical and analytical *and* emotional, therapeutic and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (p. 12).

### **Ethical Concerns**

Autoethnography may involve people other than the researcher as participants and co-constructors of the account. While I see value in this practice, in this study I have chosen not to interview others due to time constraints. Nevertheless, ethics, specifically what Ellis (Ellis, et al., 2011) calls relational ethics, play a role. Autoethnographers, like others, live in an interconnected world of relationships; unlike most others, they write about aspects of this world in intimate detail. As such, others, who are interwoven with the author’s story, will be implicated in the work. There are few official ethical guidelines for doing autoethnography, with oneself as the sole participant, and no requirement to check with an ethics review board. Regardless, I feel it is important to respect and care for the relationships that are part of my life.

Autoethnographers have a responsibility to conceal the identity of others where possible (Chang, 2011; Ellis, 2002; Ellis et al., 2011). There are many ways this may be achieved, for instance, by omitting or changing details or creating composite characters. Ellis and colleagues (2011) caution that using these devices is a balancing act between relational responsibility and achieving complexity, depth, and a truthful account. While the idea or essence of the story is more important than the details, too much change affects credibility.

The closer the relationship, the more identifiable the other is. If another’s identity cannot be concealed, then the researcher must carefully consider how to proceed, using both intellectual and emotional intelligence (Bergun; Slattery & Rappas cited in Ellis, 2002). Ellis

(2002) suggests writing as if everyone implicated in your text will read it and putting yourself in the other person's shoes, asking how they might feel about being part of this story. It might also be important to ask how others feel about the writer revealing his or her own story. Even where others are not identified, they may be distressed by what the writer reveals. Where appropriate, identifiable others may be consulted, asked to read, and respond to what the writer intends to present. However, Ellis (2002) notes that this often brings up fears of harming the very relationship we are trying to protect.

The people closest to me have most influenced my development as a counsellor; I could not write this story without referring to them. My family members are, of course, identifiable. The identities of others, friends and supervisors, are guessable if not obvious. I omitted names and small details and wrote with care, as though those I write about are reading over my shoulder. I chose not to use pseudonyms because I felt they created emotional distance in the writing. Instead, I created sections of dialogue between myself and another or used 'you' and 'I', instead of our names. Where necessary, I identify the person by the place they hold in my life (e.g. my mother, my husband). I felt this kept intimacy in the tone of the writing. Finally, I have tried to hold the focus on my own experience rather than writing extensively about others.

Researchers gain something from their research, money, prestige, a degree etc. while participants, or in this case identifiable others, may not. Ellis (2002) suggests considering whether the potential harm to others outweighs the good. It is important to be aware of the potential for exploiting others and to consider whether or how people are better off as a result of the study. As I write this, I wonder if what I have to write about could possibly be of such

worth but Ellis (2007) reminds me that stories offer the gift of companionship when others might feel alone. I think that is a worthwhile gift; it has been for me.

Chatham-Carpenter (2010) suggests that autoethnographers often put a lot of consideration into relational ethics but fail to care for themselves as participants. Because of the writer's personal involvement in the subject, autoethnography can be emotionally and mentally demanding (Muncey, 2010; Pearce, 2010). Autoethnography is not yet a well recognized form of research, so not only are writers making themselves vulnerable by inviting others into their private worlds, they may face considerable criticism for doing so (Muncey, 2010). Autoethnographers may feel self-doubt, insecurity, inadequacy, and illegitimacy as a researcher (Pearce, 2010). Finally, there is a constant push and pull about how much of a story to reveal, what risks to take (Ellis, 2002; Pearce, 2010).

In writing this autoethnography, I have tried to find a balancing point, a place where I reveal enough to convey a felt sense of my experience but not so much that I regret putting my story in print. Over the course of this year, I struggled with persistent fears of disclosing too much in the autoethnography. I worried that there would be parts of my story that I felt I needed to tell but would not be willing to. It was as though I believed I would somehow not be in control of what I chose to reveal. This fear of being exposed very much paralleled my early fears as a client in group and, to a lesser extent, individual counselling; however, in working through those fears, I became much more comfortable with myself and with appropriate self disclosure. I shifted my boundaries around to a place where I can safely write this autoethnography; this was a form of self care.

Finally, I was worried about how I would take care of myself as I reviewed the data and began pulling it together into this final piece of writing. Interestingly, and much to my

relief, writing is surprisingly enjoyable. Once I started, I realized how much of the groundwork was already done in simply living this experience, and recording and reflecting on it. I realize now that I have already been doing autoethnography for a year. Writing a thesis about it is just the finishing touch. While the writing is not stressful, the process of living life, and more specifically, living a life that is reflected on and examined in such detail, can be. The process of constantly turning inward, to examine my own thoughts, feelings, and motivations was intriguing, and I have a great deal of motivation for this kind of self reflection, but it was also tiring and, at times, anxiety provoking. There were times when I felt too preoccupied with myself and needed to turn my attention outward. I took care of myself in the basic ways: personal counselling, exercising, eating, and sleeping more or less regularly, finding some time to play, and I learned to let others take care of me, from time to time, too.

### **Research Process**

Last November, I began keeping a journal of my experiences, thoughts and feelings in the M.Ed counselling program. I wrote about practicum experiences, my own counselling; taking part in psychodrama and a process group, and about my personal life as it affects and is affected by the learning process. Some of this writing is simply a recording of what happened as I see it; some of it is evocative and creative. I also created artwork as a way of processing my experiences and expressing what does not seem easily expressible in words. Some of the pieces are ‘process art’; in these, I used art materials to express, understand, and move through whatever processes were taking place in me at the time. Process art is messy and immediate; in creating it, I am unconcerned with what the final product looks like. Other pieces are ‘conceptual’; in these, I took time to reflect on an idea, or several ideas, and have

worked them into a finished piece. Though there is more thinking ahead of time, conceptual pieces also involve an element of process in which new meaning emerges through the act of creating the art. I have found, as Rogers (1993) suggests, that the use of several modes of expression, in this case, several forms of writing and art-making, feeds and nurtures the creative process, both of learning to be a counsellor and of writing about it; it unsticks the process where it becomes stuck.

### **Data Analysis**

According to McIlveen (2008), in autoethnography, data analysis may be viewed as simply the creation of a meaningful text. Chang (2008) breaks this process down into a detailed series of steps; she describes a process of deconstruction and reconstruction in which data is sorted, coded and categorized and then reconnected to find meaning and cultural themes and to build a cohesive picture. The method I used, seemed to fall somewhere in between these two approaches. I categorized journal data as I wrote; initially, entries were divided into: personal, counselling, supervision, practice, and group. Within the autoethnography, journal entries are labeled by these divisions. However, the autoethnography itself is not organized by those categories.

A year of daily writing produced over 350 pages of typed, single spaced data to pull into a cohesive whole along with about 30 pieces of artwork. It would have been overwhelming to be too systematic in analyzing the data and I believe it would have dulled the creative process; at the same time, I needed some way to organize my thoughts and ideas. I approached this less as an analysis and more as I approach creative projects: through a process of immersion, rest, brainstorming, and creation. To re-immense myself in the experiences of the past year, I printed out the data and spent several hours a day, for many



consecutive days, re-reading and re-imagining; the goal was to reach a feeling of saturation with the material. As I read, I noted themes in the margins, highlighted sections of text that I thought I might want to use in the final autoethnography and jotted down notes in response to the original text and the re-experiencing of it. Next, I listed the themes in a Word document, along with the page number where the theme occurred. This list acted as an index, so I could easily find examples as I wrote. Afterwards, I took a break for about a week and a half, in which I did absolutely nothing related to this thesis. I allowed myself to rest. In my experience, a period of immersion followed by rest, allows unconscious creative processing to take place. I returned to the work, highly energized, and mapped out my ideas on large sheets of poster paper: brainstorming, connecting themes, writing little chunks of story, metaphors, images and ideas. I continued this process for two and half days, until it burnt itself out and there seemed to be few novel ideas emerging. At this time, the structure of the autoethnography had roughly fallen into place and I started to write.

The artwork was placed last; in some cases, it is connected to the event or idea that it was originally created in response to, in others, I have placed the artwork in the place it feels most emotionally connected to. I have written about a few of the pieces but leave most to the interpretation of the reader. My hope is that the art will stimulate thoughts, feelings or impressions that enrich the text. The artwork is also included because it is part of how I understand and process my experience; it is a way of revealing the experience that exist under, around and between words. At the same time, art conceals; I can express a wealth of feeling and thought without revealing details. In this way, art allows both vulnerability and safety. Finally, art allows for ambiguity, for meaning that is suggested or implied rather than explicit; this allows the viewer room to draw their own meaning.

As stated previously, it is important for autoethnography as a research method to move beyond an individual's experience and connect to culture. According to Ellis and colleagues (2011), personal experience may be connected to culture by framing that experience within the existing literature. In my review of the literature on counsellor identity development, a number of themes recur: anxiety, feelings of incompetence, tolerance of ambiguity, relational and affective learning, navigating personal and professional boundaries, the creation of a merged personal-professional identity, etc. These themes also occurred in my own experience. Through the creation of an evocative and personal text, I hope to breathe some life into these themes and draw readers into an insider's view of a unique culture.

### **Evaluation of the Study**

As in other forms of research, autoethnography may be evaluated in terms of its validity, often referred to in qualitative approaches as trustworthiness; however these terms take on a specific meaning based on the philosophical foundations of the methodology. Given its grounding in postmodern theories, autoethnography considers the validity of multiple points of view and forms of expression in which truth changes based on the form of communication and the communicator. For example, a performance is perceived differently and communicates differently than a written story just as a scientific account will present a different truth than a work of creative nonfiction (Strong et al., 2008)

Similarly, different people, even writing within the same style, will experience different versions of the truth and the same person will remember an event differently over time because of the reconstructive nature of memory. In autoethnography, reliability refers to the writer's credibility. How believable is the experience and how truthful does the reader believe the writer is being? Does the writer believe this is the truth? Does the account seem

more fictional than real because of the way it was written (Bochner as cited in Ellis et al., 2011)?

In terms of validity, autoethnography is less concerned with a 'true' story than it is with developing a richer, thicker, and still believable account; it seeks verisimilitude, a quality of realism, rather than objective truth (Ellis et al., 2011). A realistic text should allow the reader to enter the world of the writer to create a felt-knowledge (Nicol, 2008). According to Ellis (2000), this empathic resonance is an indicator of validity. Validity also concerns whether the story is useful to others. Does it enable people to understand a different world from their own or allow them to gain insight or connection which improves their lives in some way (Bochner as cited in Ellis et al., 2011)?

### **Summary**

The inclusion and development of the counsellor's personal self as an essential part of a professional identity has implications for counsellor education, supervision, the well being and growth of counsellors-in-training, and, ultimately, the delivery of competent service to clients (Grafanaki, 2010a). Nevertheless, there is a "surprising scarcity of literature" on the topic of counsellor's personal development in training programs (Williams & Irving, 1996, p.171). Large scale studies and developmental models have pointed to identity as an important developmental theme and have discussed personal aspects of professional practice; however, few researchers have examined this very personal subject from a very personal perspective. This autoethnography offers an opportunity to explore personal processes in counsellor identity development and to communicate about this experience in an intimate and creative way intended to create empathic resonance with the reader.

Several sources point out the potential for burnout, anxiety, and emotional drain in counsellors of all experience levels (Neufeldt et al., 1996; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, 2003; Theriault & Gazzola, 2006; Theriault, Gazzola, & Richardson, 2009). This may be moderated by receiving support from supervisors and peers (De Stefano et al., 2007; Folkes Skinner et al., 2010; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003 ). In my experience, there is a culture of quietness if not silence, among counsellor trainees about these stressors and the inter and intra-personal processes that contribute (eg. countertransference; feelings of incompetence; impasses in supervision). In my brief experience of working as a counsellor, I feel the same quiet space and it sometimes seems to act as a barrier to giving and receiving support. In exploring these processes, I hope to contribute to a more open conversation.

Finally, the literature on autoethnography dedicates much space to the argument over whether it is self indulgent or not, benefits others or not, is really research or not. I have defended autoethnography in this paper and believe in its validity and usefulness as a tool of investigation and communication. Additionally, I am doing this autoethnography for myself. I expect it to increase my self awareness and to be, at times, therapeutic; it will also make me a more effective counsellor. I am sharing this autoethnography out of my care for and desire to connect with others and because I believe that so much of learning and identity is created in relationship.



*Figure 1. Identity.*

## **Chapter 4: In Relationship**

### **Beginnings**

I am writing about identity, about the place where I began, the place where I am today and the spaces in between. More importantly, I am writing about the *process* of identity development. In doing so, I describe what has stood out to me in the course of this program: significant events in my professional development, my personal life and the place where those two overlap; right now, they seem to overlap in most places. I am writing about my experience as a counsellor, client, student, wife, daughter - many identities in one.

As much as possible, I have tried to keep a consistent flow in this writing, a progression from one idea to the next, but this isn't a story with a sequential flow events. It is a collection of reflective stories, journal entries, art, and dreams pulled together, through which I hope to convey the meanings I have drawn from my experience and evoke a felt sense of the process of identity development. In writing, I am conscious of looking for a balance between healthy self protection and vulnerability; my gaze flits often to a yellow sticky note pasted to the side of my desk. In purple ink it reads, "Will I let you read the insides of my heart?" As I move past this introduction I think, "Yes, I will show you some of it. Enough."

Welcome to my story.

### **The Good Counsellor**

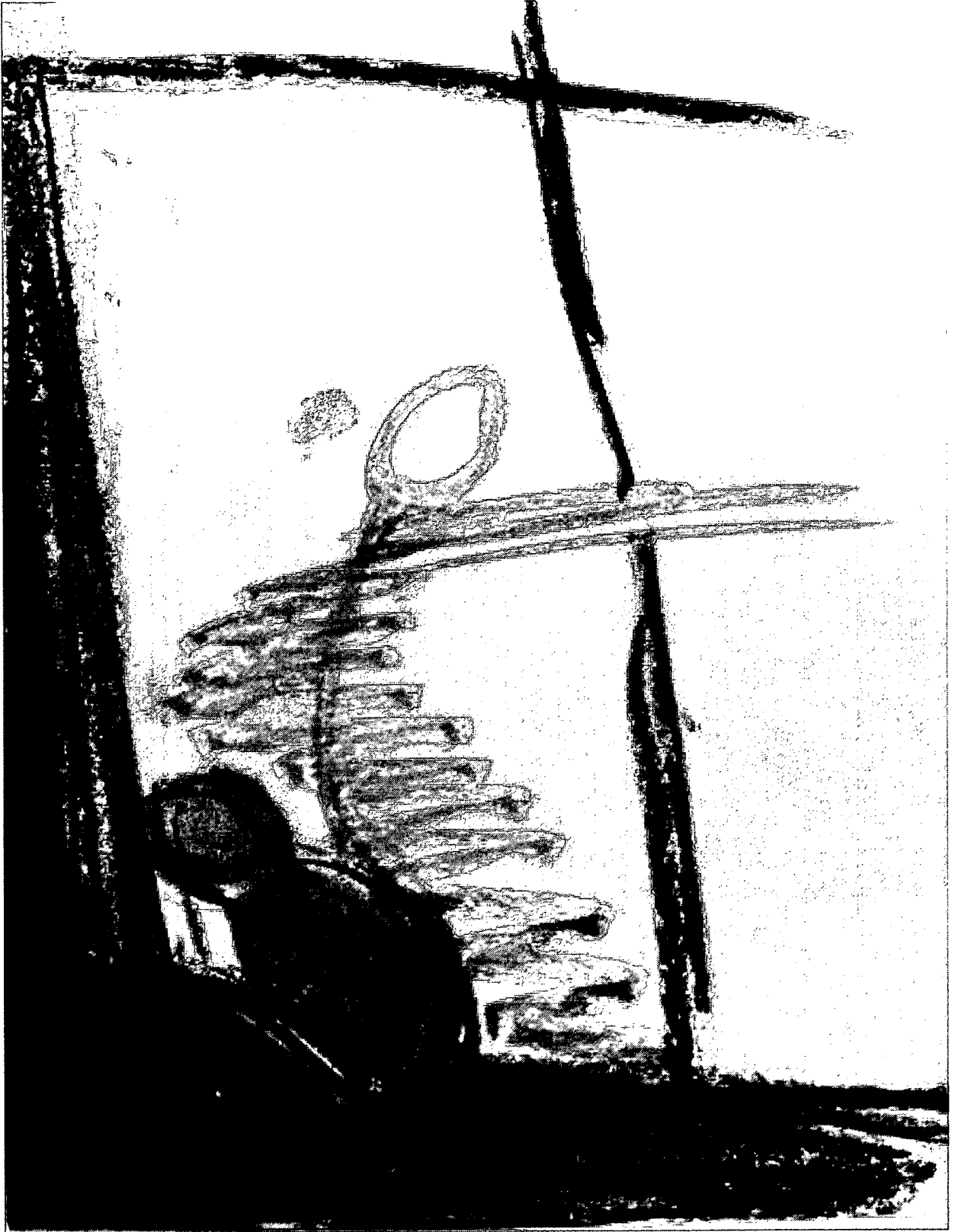
During the first year of the program, I carpooled to school with a classmate who became a valued friend. On the first day of classes, we discovered that we lived near to each other, about fifteen minutes out of town (25 in the winter). Neither of us enjoyed highway driving to our night-time classes and, after fifteen years living on the coast where it rarely

snows, navigating dark, icy highways made my heart pound and my palms sweat as they clenched the steering wheel. We calmed each others' nerves in the winter storms with these wonderful car conversations that I wish I had taped. The subject often turned to this shared feeling of being an impostor. How, each for our own reasons, we felt like someone was going to uncover the secret that we didn't really belong in graduate school. For her, the fear was mostly about not being an academic. I didn't feel like a counsellor. I secretly considered this a way bigger problem.

I can remember having this image of a good counsellor in my mind. A person who is infallibly caring, selfless, warm and fuzzy, charitable, and completely absorbed with cultivating relationships; the good counsellor is just plain nice and they really have their shit together. I had mixed thoughts and feelings about this imaginary person. I should be this person. I am not this person. I need to be this person. I am way too fucked up to ever be this person. I don't even really like this person. Actually, I think I resent people like this. I wonder when people will notice I'm not her. Gradually, I began to allow myself to notice and reflect on the times when my experience was not congruent with this image.

#### March 21/12 Group Journal

*Sometimes, I get bored in group when people talk about themselves. I lose focus but I'm afraid to say that because it seems so selfish. I get bored when someone takes up too much space, especially when it just seems like the same old same old, or it seems like they're wasting time or skimming the surface. But I'm afraid to confront people. So I get bored instead. Then I get fidgety and frustrated. Huh...this happens with clients too. That's a good insight actually.... And I am afraid to confront because I want people to like me. So I put on a nice person mask that feels fake sometimes. Because if I told you what I really think, you wouldn't like it and I wouldn't feel like a very good counsellor. I would be revealed as a shitty counsellor, the person under this nice-person facade.*



*Figure 2. Feared Selves.*



That's right, sometimes people bore me and I have a host of other feelings that have felt unacceptable to me and incompatible with being a good counsellor: jealousy and competitiveness with peers, anger and boredom with my clients. As I write, I find myself feeling hesitant to mention these, yet think it is important.

You might be saying to yourself, feelings aren't unacceptable. Of course they're not. But I find it is easier to believe that when the unacceptable feelings belong to my clients than when they are mine. It's worth trying it out. Try talking about your most unacceptable feelings to someone – your own jealousy or unreasonable anger or whatever it is for you. I find it difficult but I think maybe it's true that if I acknowledge and talk about it, then it doesn't have to be acted out. It took me months to talk about feeling bored and frustrated when someone was taking up space – and I framed it much more nicely, as feeling disconnected. Which is true actually; I often experience boredom and frustration when I feel held at a distance, unable to connect on a meaningful level.

Despite realizing over time, that effective counsellors come in a variety of flavours, all of them human and thus, imperfect, the image of the good counsellor remains hard to shake. At times, it feels like a wall in me that I continually push up against, try to wear away and in moments of desperation, just bang my head against until it bleeds. It is a very troublesome wall that affects my ability to take risks, grow and change. It emerges in supervision, group, personal counselling and practice.

A number of fears orbit this image of the good counsellor; among them is this idea that if I reveal who I truly am, people would turn away from me. I would lose their affection, their love, my connection to them. In opposition to this fear is a desire to be known; I want so badly to feel free to be myself. Yet I keep hiding behind the mask of the good counsellor. I

have a feeling this is actually an old mask and these are old feelings but I am still walking through this fear.



*Figure 3. Anxiety.*

## Walking through Fear

I've been told by more than one person that I exude a calm sort of put-together-ness; little do they know what a seething mass of anxiety I often am beneath the surface, perhaps not in session but certainly outside. Sometimes the anxiety turns into fear and I feel paralyzed; sometimes it goes the other way and becomes excitement and creativity. I feel a relentless tug of war between paralysis and creativity that, when I am feeling optimistic, settles in a place of nervous excitement. I think that maybe growth lives in this place where a constant but manageable tension lives, where I am pushing up against my own boundaries, stretching them out to create a little more space and possibility.

**Being the client.** Sometimes I feel frustrated when I hear other counsellors say that they don't really have anything to work on, so there's no need for them to see a counsellor. It feels hypocritical to me; I think if we expect our clients to be vulnerable, then we should be willing to be vulnerable too. I also feel obligated to continuing to do my own work, so that I can better understand myself and my reactions to clients better and so that I have a sense, first hand, of what it is I am asking my clients to do.

Occasionally (ok maybe often), I get on a bit of a soapbox about this. When I am on this particular soapbox, I forget that I might have said something exactly like, "I don't have anything to work on" at one time.

Jan. 14/11 Personal Journal

*I feel like I don't have enough problems to see a counsellor. Huh...I have problems. And it would be a good part of my training. Maybe I should book an appointment. There are pros and cons, maybe it's best to explore that before going.*

*Cons:*

- *What if I don't have time? And it just feels like too much with school?*
- *What if I wanted to work at the university in the future?*
- *I might have to change.*
- *I'm scared.*

*Pros:*

- *I may change.*
- *I might feel understood and accepted.*
- *I might work through some of my own stuff*
- *I'll learn to be a better counsellor*
- *I can learn better self care*
- *I can be healthier*
- *I won't feel like a hypocrite*
- *It will be courageous*

It took another three months to book my first appointment. I was scared. It took time, a wonderful supervisor who convinced me we're all fucked up and it's ok, a dash of desperation and a smallish leap of faith to get over my fear. It was the beginning of many small leaps that have continually propelled me forward.

**Criticism.** I didn't journal about this but I remember it distinctly. It was my first supervision session at my practicum placement. We were watching a video of my first client, a middle-aged woman with a significant history of physical and sexual abuse. I was nervous working with her. Being about twenty years younger, I feared having nothing useful to offer her. There was the new-ness too; she was my first client. Then the trauma piece; I had no idea how to work with that effectively or how to respond in a useful way. She told me about things that seemed terrible to me and, to her, they were just her life and she seemed disconnected from them, like they were part of a story with all the affect drained out. I felt overwhelmed and confused by the disconnect.

Anyways, we looked a lot at the details of the tape and at my use of skills. This was new for me, I had gotten used to unstructured discussions around process and how to conceptualize the case in my practice class; I felt good about my basic skills. When my new supervisor questioned my understanding of how to use empathic reflection, I sort of fell apart. I teared up. Then I blamed the tears on other stuff that was happening in my life, other



*Figure 4. Control.*

stress. But inside, my ego was crumbling. Like someone removed my façade of competence and saw right through me. It seems a bit ridiculous, but I was devastated and so embarrassed that I would break down in response to constructive criticism. I went for a walk to calm down; I walked until I had blisters on my heels.

The intensity of my reaction really bothered me; I didn't want to feel that stressed out and I was worried about how hard it would be to learn if I felt this vulnerable. I realized that I was often fearful of feedback, though the feedback I have gotten in this program has been positive, gentle, and well-intentioned. "This feeling isn't new to me either," I thought. "I've

struggled with it and let it hold me back in the past.” Shortly afterward, I booked my first counselling appointment.

**Loss of control.** An ex-boyfriend once gave me the nickname Carmen Commander (my first two names are Carmen Amanda), which I took to mean I am an excellent delegator. I think he might have meant it differently. I knew coming into this program that I can be a bit tightly wound; that I often try to control situations and outcomes and I can be quite self-controlled which has pros and cons to it. What I didn’t realize is how much fear and anxiety is behind my need to control and that I put a lot of effort into trying to control others’ perceptions of me.

#### March 21/12 Group Journal

*I was afraid of coming across as judgmental. I felt a lot of tension build in my body through silences and moments when, as a group, I felt we were skimming the surface. And also because I wanted to speak and I was holding back. So is my frustration about the group holding back or is it about me holding back? Eventually I dove in. I'm quite proud of myself for doing that. I dove in blind and paddled around in a semi-panic. I said what was happening for me in the moment. That I felt tension in me, that I want to work but I don't know where to start. But I'm starting with this feeling of wanting to move forward and being afraid. I felt incoherent, kind of blank and I said so. I had difficulty answering questions or even holding them in mind for long enough to think of the answer. I felt very stuck. I knew in the back of my head, there was the story of the client to share but I didn't feel I had the courage to do it, to dive in, it was just too scary. I couldn't really go there yet. Too risky.*

*So we explored the fear. I said I guess it's around taking up space for my story, about believing what I have to share is worthwhile. I talked about my confusion of wanting what I share to relate to counselling but not knowing how to connect the dots yet knowing that somehow they connect. I want it all to be relevant. I said I know in my head that I have the right to speak, to take time but that somehow I still feel that way.*

One of the things I learned in the process group was how difficult it can be for me to let go of control; I fear offending others or sounding stupid, not having what I want to say all worked out already. I experienced how scary it felt for me to disclose how I was feeling in the group. I could feel the tension in my body. I suppose you could also look at this as

resistance, this holding back and difficulty speaking. Instead of wanting to push against resistance with my clients, I gained more empathy for what might lie behind it. I also learned how to slow down with my clients because someone slowed the process down for me, helping me to explore the fear.

**Shame.** I am working with this small family, a mother and daughter; it's the first time I have worked with more than one person together. So, I'm with the two of them and Mom melts down. She swings between crying uncontrollably and threatening her daughter and blaming her addiction on her. Emotion is just leaking out through the seams. It's like she's a sponge, soaking with affect, that someone just squeezed. The room is soaked in it. I am soaked in it. I feel awful; like I have completely lost control of the situation. I desperately want to protect the daughter and I feel totally powerless to do so. At the end Mom walks out and slams the door. I am left there, uselessly trying to console the daughter, who I'm sure has experienced this many times. It's only me that needs consoling. I talk about it a bit in supervision the next day but cut it short as I feel my eyes filling with tears. I feel so out of my depth, so inadequate. I should never have taken these clients on.

Nov. 3/12 Group Journal

*Group felt different today. It felt really hmmm....how did it feel? I felt relieved, accepted, appreciated. I really wanted to talk about the mom & daughter in group today. I guess I have wanted to work on stuff before but the excitement of trying something new is all mixed up with hesitation and nervousness. It's freeing to be able to speak with less fear. It feels like I've been standing on the edge of the pool, shuffling back and forth before diving in. That place of hesitation is all nervy. Today I felt like I could jump in more quickly, I knew the water would be ok.*

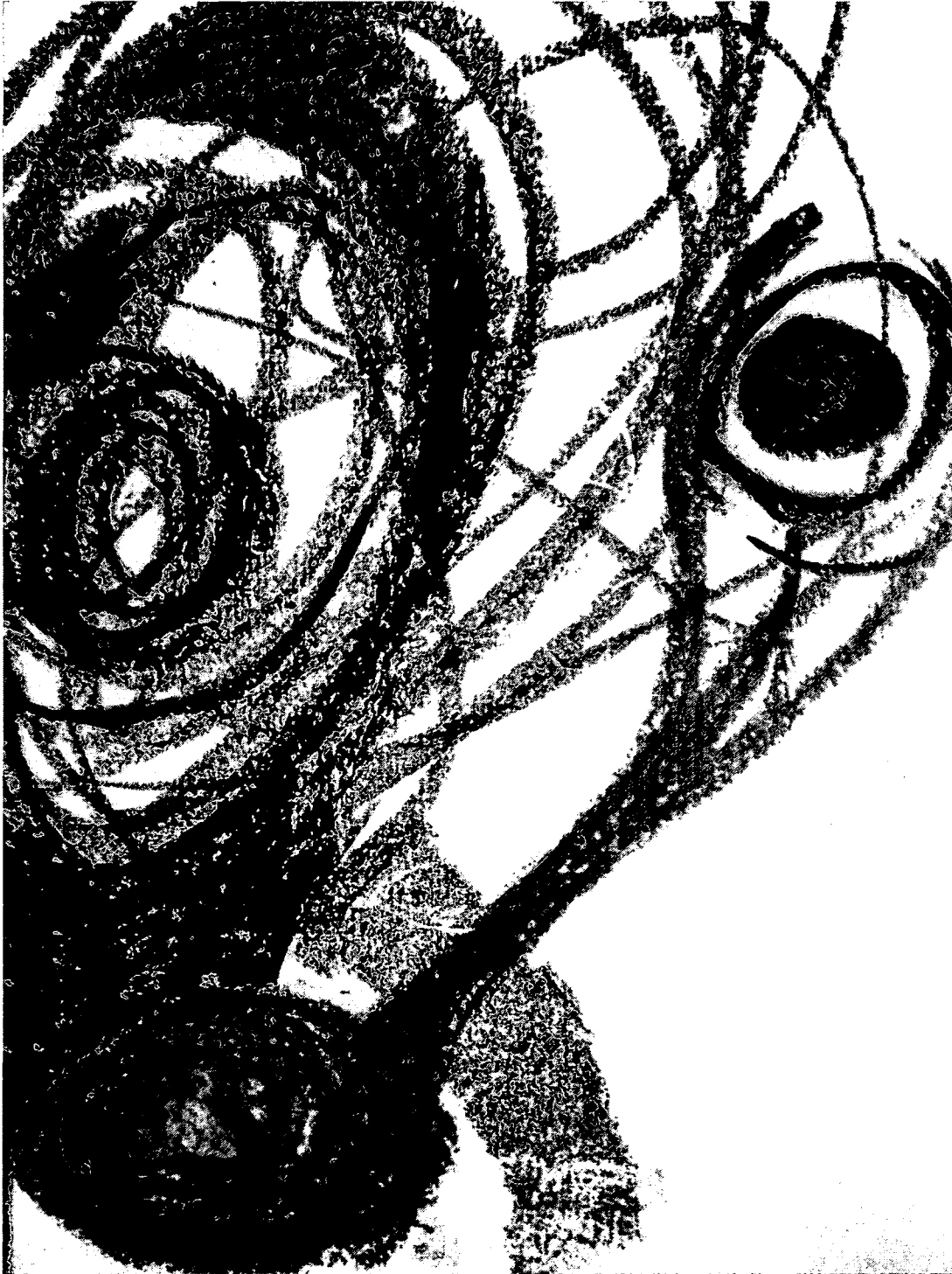
Dec.7/12 Group Journal

*... I was talking about what the group had done for me and how helpful it had been to bring the feelings I'd had in that session with the Mom and daughter.*

*"I felt ok, supported, validated...you know?"*

*"So you were able to bring that without feeling ashamed."*

*I knew what I was feeling but it was still nice to have it acknowledged. I suppose it saved me from having to say it and it was still recognized and somehow that's important.*



*Figure 5. Mother, Daughter, Me.*



## **Inherited Identities**

In our Theories class, we were asked to discuss whether it was important to address the past with clients. Someone gave this analogy. If your car got stuck on the train tracks and a train was coming, would you try to figure out how you got stuck or would you just get out of the car? It's a clever argument for brief counselling; of course you get out of harm's way. On the other hand, if you keep getting stuck on train tracks, it's probably a good idea to investigate the how and why of that once you are safe.

As I've moved through this program, I've felt drawn to better understand my own history. I came to be who I am within the context of my family; it is the nature and the nurture of my self – genetics, culture, and environment. At the same time, I've found it quite difficult to explore. The messages I've heard – looking at the past is about blaming your parents, the past is over and can't be changed – circulate in my mind along with a fear of betraying the people closest to my heart. It has taken a lot of convincing, hedging, and overcoming guilt to understand for myself that this is not about blaming or dwelling. It is about understanding and appreciating who I am: my strengths and weaknesses, the roles I take on in relationships, my motivations for doing this work, the countertransference I experience with clients. I think it is also about learning to accept all the parts of me and it is a chance to mourn and let go of the things I wished were different but were not. This story holds a little glimpse of that work.

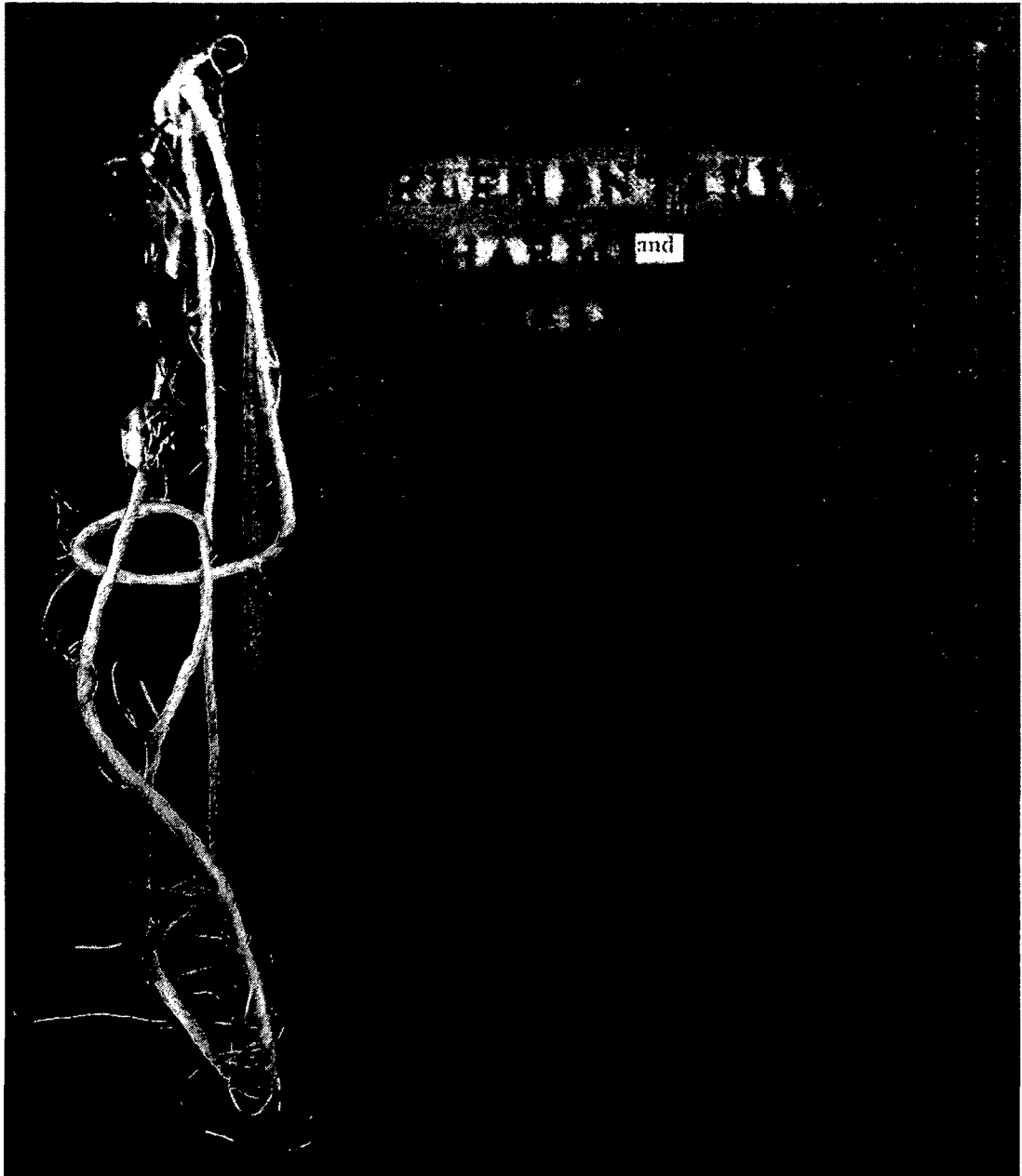


Figure 6. Elementary Harm and Art. An altered book of drawings.

*Wolf Mother and the Game of Life*

*When I was little we had this board game, the game of Life. You drove little plastic cars around the board and put little plastic pegs into the car: blue for boys, pink for girls, mom, dad, kids. Little plastic pegs slotted beautifully into little plastic cars. Neat, clean, tidy.*

*In the base of my grandmother's heavy wooden coffee table, was a collection of art and travel books. A glossy-paged hardcover featured the art of ancient Rome. I would drag it out and plunk it on the deep red shag and lay there, in the nook*

*between table and couch, pouring through the pictures. Thirty years later, one picture comes to mind with remarkable clarity: two brothers, Romulus and Remus, suckling on the distended teats of a she-wolf. Primal, nurturing, fierce. My childhood was filled with many moments of happiness, love and warmth but it was not much like the game of Life.*

*I grew up in the North, three generations on my grandparents' farm. Oma, Opa, Dad and I. Oma and Opa came from Germany after the war. Opa had shrapnel embedded in the backs of his gnarled hands and he occasionally awoke screaming from nightmares. He was a quiet, gentle man, good with skittish creatures. He would stroke my hair, with shaking hands, much like he did the twenty or so feral barn cats that would come only to him. It was immensely soothing.*

*Oma was a force; the ruling matriarch of our little family, a wild vortex around which all of us orbited. She too survived the war; she paid a man to help her cross the border and escape from the East. At the last moment, she decided not to go; she hid in a graveyard, baby in her arms, as the escaping party was shot down. Eventually, she made it but without her daughter. Oma told stories about her childhood often; she was shipped to South Africa, alone, at the age of eleven and lived with her Oma, parents and siblings. I remember her talking about her father, brother and sister but never about her mother.*

*We rarely spoke of my mother either; she left when I was about a year old and drifted in and out of my life thereafter. No one said why. I loved my mother. When I stayed with her, we would stay up late at night talking. It felt intimate, connected. I loved the smell of her and these small moments when, I too, had a mother.*

*My dad is a caregiver. It's a powerful strength, an aura of warmth and protection. I sometimes wonder what kind of karma plunked him into a life of caring incessantly and devotedly for women: to raise a daughter alone, care for a mentally ill mother, then a wife with chronic illness. I love my dad fiercely and sometimes my heart breaks for all he has given of himself.*

### *Playing the Dying Game*

*Out of the thirty years I knew Oma, she was dying for thirty of them. There was an arsenal of pills in her bedside table: heart pills, water pills, sleeping pills, pain pills, calming pills. Once, she called me after she'd taken a bunch of them at once. The dying game went something like this.*

### *Game Play*

- *There are several safe zones located at the outer edges of the game board.*
- *In the center of the board, is the vortex.*
- *Players start on the board in their safe zones. The vortex is calm.*
- *A player steps outside the safe zone, either towards the vortex (in a possible bid for control of the system) or away (in an attempt to exit the game).*

- *All safe zones disappear. The vortex rages, cries, flings guilt and cast iron frying pans about and may end up hospitalized. Pets disappear. Your home is threatened.*
- *Players are sucked into the vortex and make desperate attempts to soothe or fight it.*
- *Those not sucked in directly lick the wounds of those who were.*
- *All players return to their safe zones. The vortex is calm. Repeat.*

#### *Rules of the Dying Game*

1. *Don't fuck with the vortex.*
2. *It is impossible not to fuck with the vortex.*

#### *Ashes*

*Eventually, Oma succeeded in dying. Power dispersed and so did the family, blown like so much wispy, dead, dandelion fluff in a stifling summer breeze. It lacked gusto. Oma's death was a non-moment in our lives; a collective semi-heave of not-quite-relief bound up in guilt. We seem purposeless and disoriented without chaos to unite us. We never had a funeral. Five years later, the ashes sit in an uneventful box on Dad's cluttered desk. Here lies chaos, reduced to a heap of dust, and still living on through us.*

**The good daughter.** Who am I in this? My relationship with Oma was difficult; filled with love, fear, anger, and confusion. In my mind, I felt responsible for averting her storms and sweeping up the aftermath. I offered up achievements like gifts on a platter: won awards, got straight A's. I wanted my dad's life to be easier and, though I wasn't conscious of it at the time, I think being "the good daughter" seemed like a much better way to get love and attention than through manipulation, threats, and demands. I didn't want to be like Oma. So, I was kind of a neurotic, super-achiever of a kid, the kind teachers love and other kids bully. I suppose I haven't changed that much. I think I inherited some of my dad's compassion and warmth. And from those close moments with my mom, I bring a love of intimacy and deep conversation into my work.



*Figure 7. Oma. A drawing from Elementary Harm and Art.*

**Love and the libertarian inquisition.** I spent very little time with my mother as I was growing up. Nevertheless, I could not fully understand myself without trying to understand my relationship to her. The culture of my mother's family is very different from what I grew up with; it's more distant and intellectual, less emotionally expressive. She is a devoted libertarian and a political activist for that cause. The libertarians of my family value individual freedom and the pursuit of unrestricted capitalism as moral imperatives. They

oppose gun control and environmental protection laws because they infringe on individual rights. Taxation to support universal health care or other social safety nets is viewed as an unfair obligation imposed on those who work hard by those who refuse to work for themselves. They are atheists with a cult-like devotion to Ayn Rand and objectivism preaching the gospel of *The Fountainhead* to guests and family alike. Anyone expressing a hint of socialist sympathies is subject to incisive questioning of their beliefs, regardless of the social context. It makes for uncomfortable dinner parties. On a positive note, the awkwardness is balanced with a beautiful creativity, both artistic and musical, through which all the feelings and desire for connection in the family seem to flow.



Figure 8. Dreams of my Mother.

I find it hard to be “the good daughter” to my mother; increasingly so as I grow into this new identity, this new skin. Being like my mom requires an entirely different mask. I tried wearing it, tried to integrate her values into my identity in an effort not to lose her for good – to be “the good enough daughter”. I am afraid it isn’t possible to be different and still be loved. Somehow, despite this gaping chasm between us, we are still intimately connected. There is a very old piece of my heart that is still broken and I don’t yet know how to fix it or mourn it or lay it to rest.

Feb.10/12 Personal Journal

*For as long as I can remember, I have had a sense of needing to somehow fix myself so others will like me. Somewhere in me, despite a boatload of rational thoughts to the contrary, I feel like something is subtly wrong, something I have never been able to see clearly but which I think everyone else can see. It’s like everyone else got the rules to the social game but me. It’s strange, and probably worth reflecting on, that I would choose a career that relies on my ability to form strong relationships.*

*I know it was not my fault that my mother left but children are egocentric. I remember loving her so much. The summer I was nine, I went to stay with her in Edmonton for a couple of weeks. She gave me her jean jacket and I took it home with me and slept with it for weeks, breathing in the fading smell of her.*

*I was heart-broken each time she left my life. I wonder if maybe, because she came and went without much visible upset, if I somehow internalized the idea that there is something wrong with me, something unlovable where no matter how much I love her, that love can’t be returned. In accepting responsibility for it, there was at least some hope of changing it.*

*In my life, I think I often accept responsibility for and try to control others’ opinions of me. I feel like I am so often adjusting myself to what I believe I need to be to be accepted. And when I fail to hit that moving target, this horrible inner critic comes out in me. It’s no wonder I can’t stand anyone else’s criticism, I’m already raw from my own. So much of me feels guarded, hidden away. This feels exhausting now, frustrating and isolating. I don’t want to do this anymore.*

I’m trying to understand how I might have come to be as I am. I want to stop blaming both of us for what was, so I can make something of what is. I have started a process of slowly setting myself free, of allowing myself to be. I am gradually relinquishing control and

I am surrounded by people who keep teaching me that this is ok. People who, every time I take the risk of revealing myself, every time I risk this fear of rejection and loss, meet me with open arms. My fears are disproved, over and over again, not by someone convincing me they aren't rational, not in my mind which already knows this but in my heart.

### **Motivations**

As an artist, I have struggled for years with the reality that I am not that enthusiastic about making art for a living; it always seems to feel like work. In the past, I have had a lot of judgments about that – that I am too thin-skinned, not driven enough, give up too easily. Unsurprisingly, judging it doesn't change it and nothing else seems to either, probably because I'm not motivated to do much about it.

Counselling is different. I have never been so intrigued by, energized by, and motivated for any other kind of work. I consume heaps of information about therapy, engage in every kind of counselling-related activity I can find and, over the past year, I've written about the learning process extensively; none of this feels like work. Perhaps because of my experience as an artist, I have a bit of a cynical streak and I can honestly tell you that I never expected to feel passionate about a career in this way. I didn't believe it was possible for me. The fact that I do feel this way continually surprises me. Usually, my interest in new projects, goals or endeavours wanes quickly; I have a burst of intense motivation and then it just fizzles. So, this sustained interest is unfamiliar and I often find myself waiting for the bottom to drop out. Increasingly, I trust that this will not happen anytime soon. So, I am left with the question, why? Why am I so drawn to this work?

**Self interest.** I am interested in understanding what makes me tick. I'm curious about myself; I want to see in all the hidden corners of my psyche; feel out the twists and



turns of my life. I'm fascinated with the beauty and complexity of human experience and my own experience is an entry into this - a starting point to the maze.

Sept. 30/12 Personal Journal

*We completed this checklist about what we gain from the work. Intimacy and Altruism were 4s (out of 5) but curiosity, growth, reflection, creativity were all 5s. As we talked about it, I said I suppose I have a bit of a judgment about that. That, it seems like all the things I really like are a bit self serving. Altruism is there but it's not at the top. I said that's not really surprising to me but I feel a bit bad about it. On the other hand, if the things I want from the work are within me and not outside, then I guess that might be ok.*

*You said not to judge it, just understand it. Be aware of it because it will affect your work. Instead of rescuing me and saying it's all ok, it was more like, you're ok and you need to be aware that this will affect your work. I appreciated that - I think it helps me to be more honest with myself and to make choices about how I work - at the same time, I felt vulnerable in the moment - a bit raw.*

**Intimacy.** I love deep conversations. I love getting to know others, developing closeness, and being trusted to hold secrets and feelings. Particularly in the beginning, I wonder if I was attracted to the safe sort of intimacy, the one-way intimacy, offered by this career. I think I had a strong desire for intimacy but some difficulty opening up to others and being vulnerable. In the course of this program, however, I've taken opportunities to reveal more of myself, I've become much more comfortable with being vulnerable and I love the thrill of that intimacy too.

March 19/12 Group Journal

*...I have concerns about this being too much about my personal stuff (instead of professional), though I know the two are connected. I'm not sure yet how to connect all the dots but that's what this process is for. I suppose I'm still thinking about using the group's time for myself. I don't want to be selfish or self absorbed.*

*I guess this relates to the why of counselling for me. Am I looking for one-way intimacy? Intimacy without risk. If I can't or won't take risks with my clients, then what effect does this have on therapy? Not that I should disclose too much but I know there are places I'm not so willing to go with clients, because I don't go there myself.*

March 26/12 Group Journal

*At work, there's this laborious process of building trust with new people-supervisor, colleagues. Funny, but I hate it somehow...me, the one who's supposed to*

*be the relationship builder. But it's a relationship in which I feel vulnerable and that's a lot harder than listening to someone else's vulnerability and being the trusted one.*

July 21/12 Personal Journal

*I think it would be useful to understand how excited and passionate I am about this whole career path. It scares me a little to be honest. What if I lost this hope? What if, for some reason, I couldn't do the work anymore? What's all this passion about? Intimacy. Intimacy is thrilling, being able to reveal more of myself and learn more about others. I like being good at my work, at uncovering new ways of thinking and feeling and understanding. I love the idea that there is this undiscovered country within each of us... just waiting to be known. In knowing and being known there is deeper, more meaningful connection with self and others.*

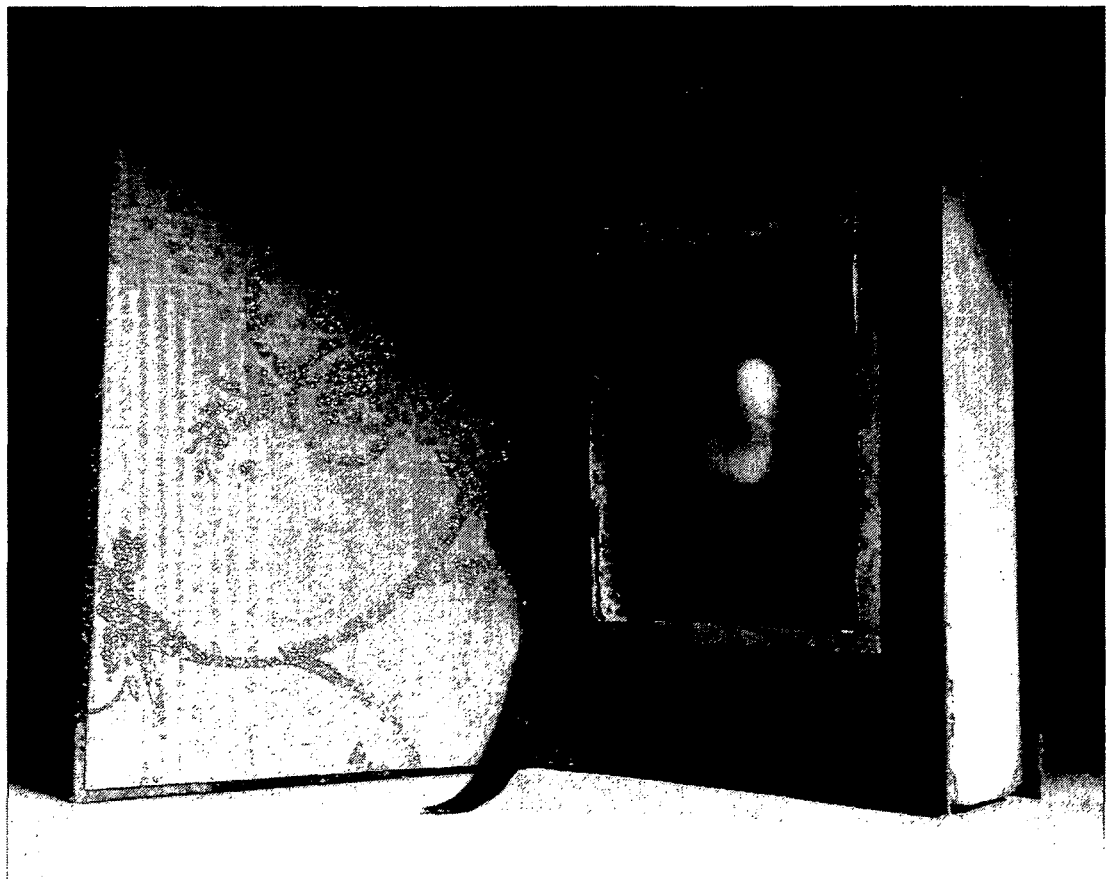


Figure 9. Natural Healing. An altered book.

**Family.** I grew up with a grandmother who struggled with mental illness. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that I grew up with a grandmother who had a mental illness that the rest of us struggled with. Sometimes, I felt like I was the only one who could see how crazy and turbulent and manipulated our lives were. I've had a desire to validate, and

make sense and meaning of that experience for a long time. In my family, I learned how to be calm in midst of a storm and I know how to offer that calm to others. Maybe I feel compelled to fix, heal, care for, or protect others. Maybe I am trying to transform that experience somehow.

#### June 2011 Natural Healing

*In this piece...my own vulnerability and my clients' vulnerability are embedded in the golden egg. Vulnerability and preciousness. I feel protective, nurturing toward it. It is nestled in the book. The book is one of natural healing, it's insides made a bit magical, compelling, fanciful, aged... Like looking into old knowledge. The process, contains delicacy and violence. The care of handling the egg, then hacking through the layers of glued together pages. My thought of the pages is that, though this is a manual of healing, a book of medicine, it is also a description of pathology. As I work, I think if the many layers of my grandmother's pathology, her constant sickness. My feelings of contempt for her helplessness. And I cut this all out to house a precious, fragile thing.*

All the seeds of my doubt seem to lie here too. Sometimes, I wonder if I am just doing this, becoming a counsellor, to heal myself or to prove to myself that I am kind, I am the good counsellor and a good person; I am not cold-hearted or manipulative or cruel.

#### June 6/12 Personal Journal

*Often I wonder how I ever could have become a counsellor. I became so cold and shut off from her. I thought her emotional outbursts, all the crying and the dying; it was all just bullshit. Manipulative bullshit. And I put up a wall. And I thought I am not a good person. I'm not a caring person. I'm cold and distant and self centered and don't give a shit. Now I feel like if I am exposed, if my supervisors, my instructors see who I really am, they will think I'm not who I pretended to be. I am not a kind person who cares about others.*

*But maybe it wasn't all this way. You know what I see about myself? That despite feeling pain and fear and contempt, at the end, I found compassion for her too. I remember a visit to her, in the care home. I think I was home for the holidays. I made sure the nurse came to check her feet, tend to the diabetic ulcers and that she had taxi vouchers to get to the hospital. I remember the pity and the care I felt for her then, how my heart ached. I tried my best to protect her.*

*I suppose I tried my best to protect myself too.*

## Trust

I have had a remarkable opportunity to focus on my own self development for the past two and half years. For me, growing has involved taking a series of small but significant risks in a safe and supportive environment. In taking incremental risks, I have slowly learned to trust myself more, explore further and deepen my connections with others. This section is composed of a story about psychodrama and journal excerpts in which trust, vulnerability, and self disclosure are central themes.

### *Trust, Safety, Art and Grandmothers: A Psychodrama*



Figure 10. In the North.

*I grew up in the north  
Where it is sometimes so cold your nostrils freeze together when you breathe  
And we are buried in mounds and mounds of snow  
And I wonder every March, as the days grow longer, if it will ever disappear*

*I grew up on my grandparents' farm  
And when the endless snows melted, a few months after my first birthday  
My grandfather had me on my first horse*

*Her name was Menina  
Which my grandmother said is Portuguese  
My grandmother spoke German and English and a smattering of other languages.  
Her father was a harbor master so they travelled a lot. From Germany to South  
Africa and back again. She came to Canada after the war, first to Montreal and then  
to Vancouver. But somehow, my grandmother ended up on an isolated farm in an  
isolated little town in the north.*

*When I was little, she told me often how the streets were unpaved mud pits and there  
were wooden sidewalks when she got here.*



*Figure 11. Menina.*

*And she said how the whores on George Street had yelled at her to get away from  
their corner. Her, with two little boys in tow, can you imagine?*

*It was all a great disappointment to her.  
For that, and other reasons, she was not easy to live with.*

*So my first psychodrama took me back to a place where I was 12 years old and I was angry and powerless and hurt...and I talked to my grandmother.*

*When I felt overwhelmed, I found safety in the drama as I did as a child...in spending time with my horse. The summer I was 12, I rode my horse nearly every day. I was up when the sun was up and back when it went down. I rode in the ditches by the roadside, down the cut-grass power lines, through the bush to the muddy river. And I sat there in the dappled sunlight.*

*When a storm came up, I would imagine that it was me making the wind blow fiercely. I would imagine myself like a superhero, a person with magic – powerful, strong.*

#### Dec. 10/11 Psychodrama Journal

*... we talked about how I felt when I was riding. The feelings of peacefulness, strength and confidence. Of being able to handle difficult situations, situations that made sense and were in my control. We moved back and forth from the tears and the yelling to that place of trust and safety.*

*...just got home and tried to explain this to my husband...he doesn't get it. He's worried about me and thinks I'm upset. I'm ok though. I feel like a kid, I want to yell hey! Look what I just did! I've never done anything like this before and I think it has changed some things in me that I needed, wanted to change...Think of the possibilities that might open up now...I'm so proud of myself for just being so honestly me. I have taken myself to a place where I can truly live. I am so happy for myself I could cry.*

#### Dec. 12/11 Psychodrama Journal

*Something has shifted in me. It's like my head and my heart were connected and now I can move again. I had this experience in which I learned that my feelings are ok even when they're dramatically expressed. I was able to explore my childhood and have it mean something; say all the things I never could have said; be both powerful and vulnerable. And somehow... I don't feel exposed. I was with people who support me, who I trust deeply and feel connected to. And I feel more confident now in being myself... That's the shift. I trust myself more now.*

#### March 10/12 Personal Journal

*I drew this picture and I don't know what the purpose of it is or the meaning. I just know it let me sink into myself for a while and I need that now. I'm wondering about it. I wonder about myself, fused to the horse, wrapped in its mane like a cloak of feathers. About looking into the future and into the past. About the strength and the imagination that I bring with me and about the pieces of this drama that I brought with me when I moved to the city. What held me back and what pushed me forward. But the city is so small in this and that was a long time ago.*



Figure 12. Trust, Safety, Art & Grandmothers.

April 2/12 Counselling Journal

*Today I found the last piece of this story. I sat immersed in grief, stunned with crying in my counselor's office. She asked me to envision wrapping myself in something, protecting myself. It came to me immediately. I thought of this picture, of the safety and comfort in it and I wrapped myself in that feathered mane, in soft whiteness, and I let its light seep into me. And it soothed my wounded heart.*

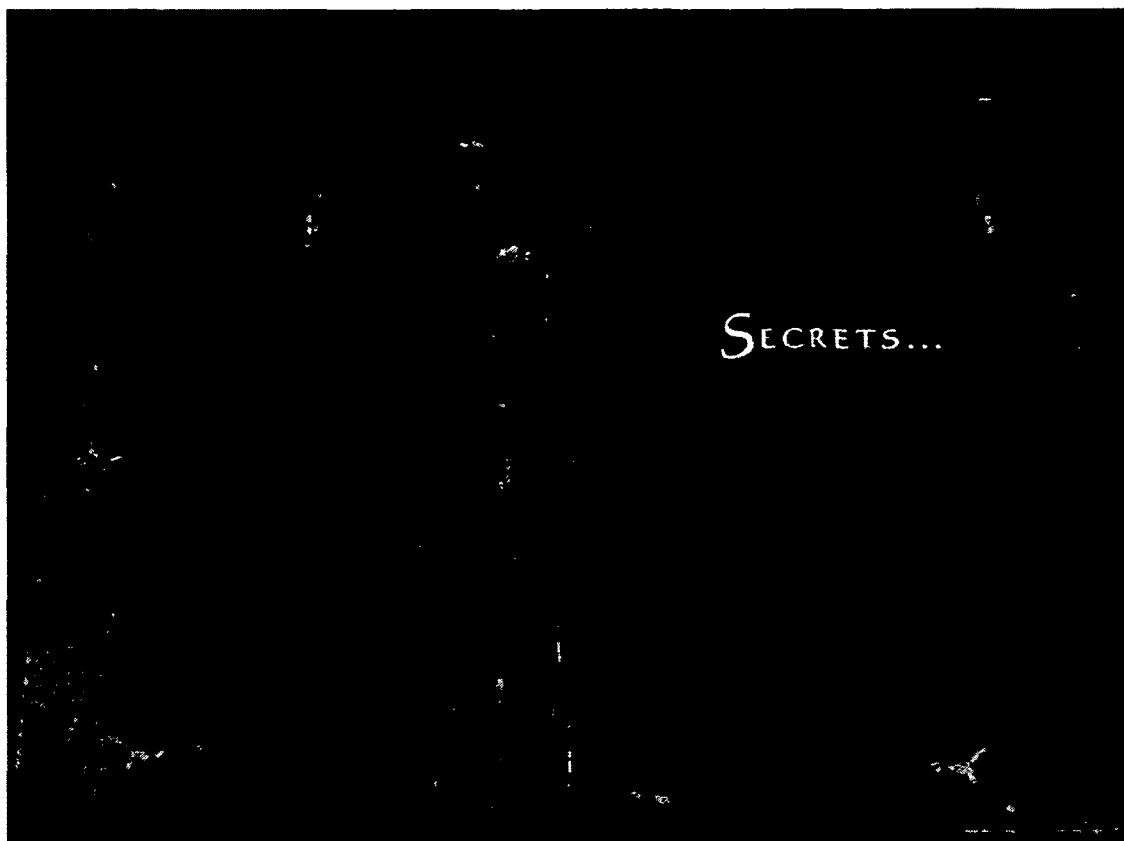


Figure 13. The Book of Secrets.

### **Holding secrets.**

March 27/12 Personal Journal

*I have been thinking that I've been thinking through this disclosure piece so much that I've worn a track in my brain. Same thoughts, over and over.*

*I think I want to talk about this.*

*But why would you do that Christie? Are you trying to get attention? What does this have to do with counseling?*

*But I think it does relate maybe? I think I want to be known.*

*But why reveal that? It's ridiculous. It's pointless. There's no reason to.*

*Because I feel like I'm hiding and I'm thinking about it so much it must be important...*

*And around and around we go again.*



*I was thinking that the track is so deep, all I need to do is fill it with water and sea monsters and I will have a moat. A very deep moat around this piece of my life. Before there was a wall. Now, also a moat. How is this getting better by keeping it in? I'm so fucking tired of fighting myself. I'm so tired of anxiety, of hiding, of not being known, of being guarded, protective. Layers of protective coating, layers and layers of it.*

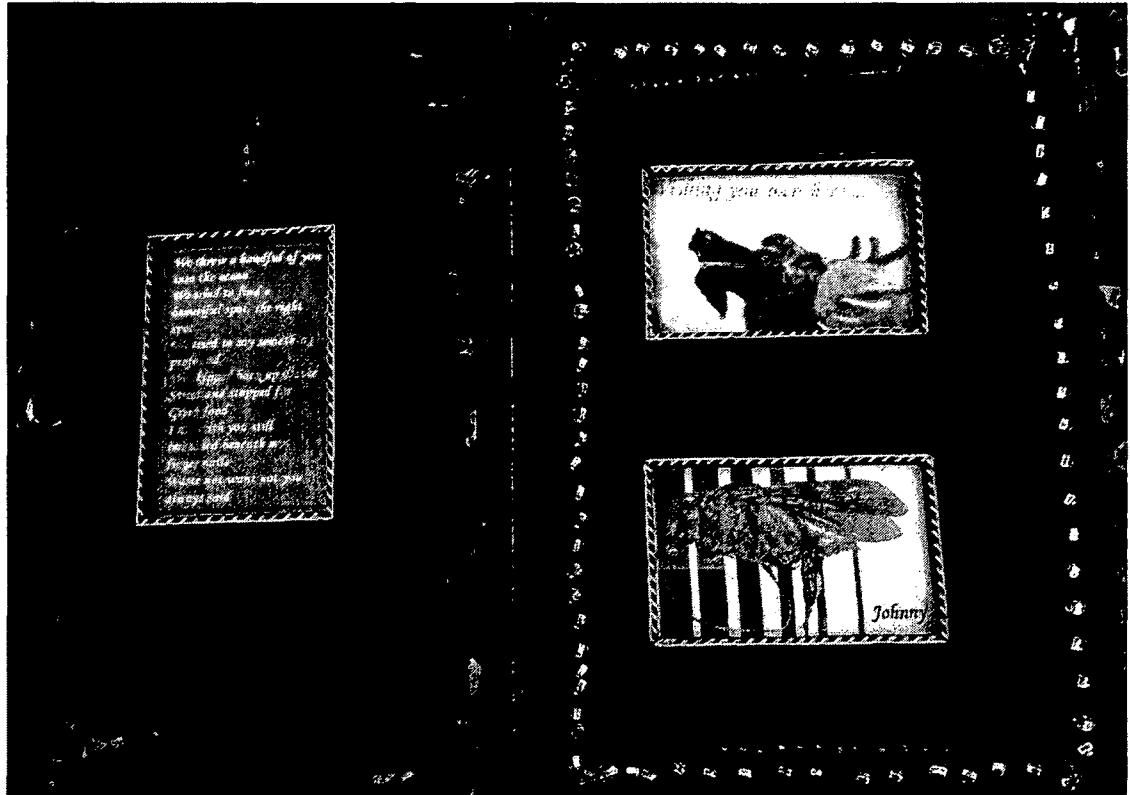


Figure 14. The Book of Secrets (inside).

### **Secrets held.**

July 6/12 Personal Journal

*... You asked me where I thought I would have ended up. I said, I don't know. I think when I was in it; I thought I'd never really get out.*

*The process of saying it was so interesting to me. This secret I have obsessed over telling or not telling for so long, was so easy to tell to the right person in the right time. You said sometimes we just need to be held. Just need a space to tell the story. That's what I came to when I asked myself a couple of weeks ago what I really wanted from telling the story. And I felt held. I felt safe, cared for. You didn't ask for more details and didn't shut it down either. You weren't shocked, didn't pity me and I don't think you think any less of me. You said that this kind of experience adds a lot of depth to the work we can do. And that means a lot to me. How can I help my clients to feel like this? To feel this safe?*

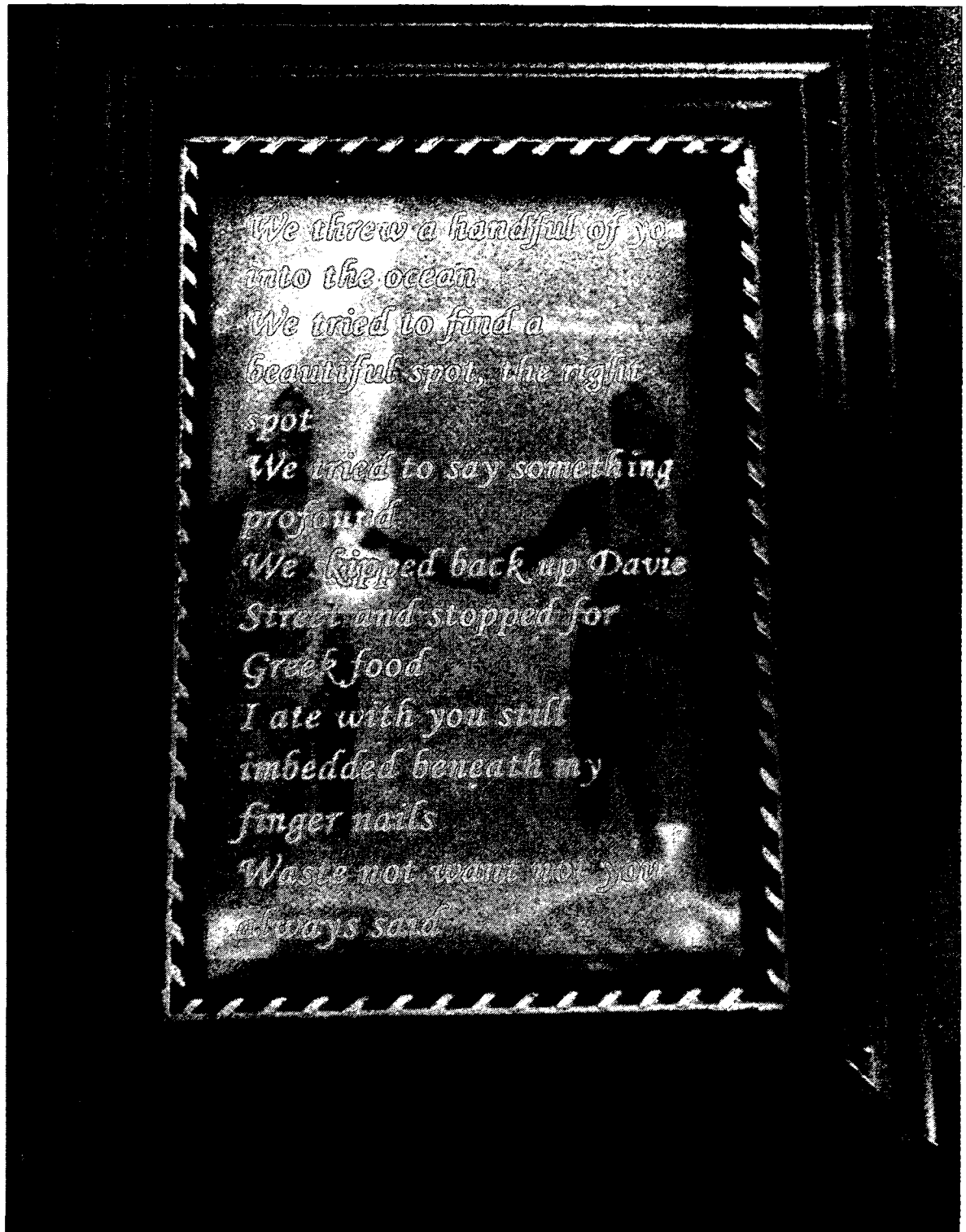


Figure 15. The Book of Secrets (detail).

## Self Compassion and Acceptance

When I first started counselling, my therapist tried to help me care for myself, to feel compassion for myself. She talked about re-parenting my inner child which I felt cynical about; she asked me to talk to the child in myself kindly which I was resistant to. Partly, it felt kind of hokey and partly, I still wanted to wallow in feeling pissed off, sad and sorry for myself for a while. I didn't want to take care of myself yet.

Despite my initial resistance, beginning to develop compassion for myself might be the most important thing I have done in this program. The inner child language still makes me cringe a bit but I found a path to self compassion which has worked for me. Shortly after beginning our work together, I picked up a habit of doing self-compassionate meditation. It has been an immensely soothing counter to my inner critic. So, I reluctantly admit the seeds my therapist planted grew.

### May 3/12 Counselling Journal

*Last night as I was meditating and again at 4:00 this morning, an intrusive thought popped into my mind. It was strikingly familiar to the fucking miracle question. I was ruminating on feeling basically unlovable - and all sorts of variations on this theme (incapable of connection, not growing, not doing work, ya-da ya-da ya-da). And I thought to myself, if I could wave a magic wand...*

*Then I shut down the thought. If I was being kind with myself I might say I pushed it gently but mindfully from my mind - but that would be a lie.*

*So if I could wave a magic wand and have everything be ok what would that look like? I would not be ruminating like this - letting it keep me up all night. I would accept myself as I am. I would find some way of loving myself. I kept telling myself last night. It's ok, I make mistakes and it's ok. I am imperfect and it's ok. I would like to believe that. If I had a magic wand I would feel that in my heart and it would allow me to keep doing the work I am doing without all the fucking static. But this is the work, accepting myself. I wish I could look into my life, understand where all of this came from. If I had a magic wand I would be courageous enough to say all of this, to get help with this.*



Figure 16. Untitled.

### Inviting in the guests.

June 17/12 Personal Journal

*We're on another road trip to teach in Terrace this weekend. We are listening to this meditation CD and the woman recites this poem by Rumi and there is a guided meditation around welcoming in the guests.*

*The Guest House  
This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.  
~ Rumi*

(Rumi as cited in Brach, 2005)

June 17/12 Personal Journal

*When I feel fear, shame, grief, anger, sadness*

*Let me welcome them like a guest at my door*

*Please come in and teach me*

*I am grateful and I have no complaints*

*As I welcome these feelings, that are so often pushed away, I welcome the disowned pieces of myself.*

*Today I tried a meditation. I went into my body and into the feelings there – grief, shame, anger at myself. I allowed them in, I said 'yes' to them. I accepted their presence. I delved deeper into them – thoughts, voice, feeling, body, wordless and word-ful sensations. The meditation asks me to find within myself that which is unforgivable. And I felt not just the pain and grief of the loss of my relationship and my friends but the words, "I'm sorry" repeated over and over. And I comforted myself, "I am sorry for this suffering" I said. I cried and felt this tension in my chest and felt acutely all these other losses un-grieved for, all the old hurt and I gave myself compassion for this too... As I welcome in these pieces of myself, I feel a deep sense of humility and also self acceptance. I feel my heart opening, I feel what is perhaps surrender but not as defeat, as something beautiful. As a state of receptiveness, a place where I don't need to hide from myself anymore.*

As I write this section, I feel a very spiritual side to me. This is hard for me to accept and harder to share. My mother's daughter is an atheist. I fear sharing this and being thought a fool, sharing this and losing her, losing you.

**Creating safety within.** I have an intense inner critic. It takes me from something that I didn't do right, some way in which I didn't meet my own expectations straight to this sense of I'm a bad person, there is something wrong with me and I need to hide that, at all costs, or I will lose the people around me. This fear and self aversion feels primal, dangerous and powerful and it can't be reasoned with.

So, I have started to create safety within myself. And because there is more safety now, more trust that those around me will accept me, more trust that I will not tear myself apart for my imperfections, I have been able to look inside at parts of me I didn't want to see. Seeing allowed me to take responsibility for those parts. And taking responsibility allowed me to change.



*Figure 17. Finding Ground.*

## Change

Feb. 29/12 Counselling Journal

*I have been thinking that therapy is both kind and nurturing and it is violent in its way too. We expose what is hidden away in hurt and bring it out to heal. We provide the safety and support that allows people to find courage. Change is uncomfortable... sometimes deeply painful. Change has consequences, intended and unintended results. Maybe making positive change does not save us from pain, it allows us to face it head on to find a more honest, creative version of self.*

When I started this program, one of my professors said, "I'm not an expert in other people's lives. I'm an expert in helping people change their lives."

My heart sank a little. "Shit" I thought, "I haven't had much luck changing myself. I have no idea how to help someone else change."

More recently, I heard, "people don't come to counselling to change, they come to learn to manipulate better."

That got under my skin. I thought, "What the hell is the point then?" Then I asked myself, "Is that what I'm doing? Have I spent the last two years, thinking I'm trying to change but really just learning how to play the game better? Because that would be deeply disappointing."

Not long after this unsettling conversation, I was watching a video on group therapy and this woman was talking about how, as counsellors, we often have these grand hopes for our clients to change and it's not that people don't change but change is a big thing. Her hopes, she said, were not really for change but for her clients to become more authentic, more fully themselves. I liked that. It fits for me, feels like what I'm trying to do for myself and my clients. Not changing myself but becoming more fully myself.

When I first started my own counselling, I think I was looking to change some things and understand others. Over time, through the group work and psychodrama and counselling, I think small things did shift in me. I don't think who I am has changed but that's not really

what I was looking for. I was hoping to feel less anxious and confused, happier, more creative. I feel happy and more creative. I think I respond to my feelings differently now, that I tolerate a wider range of feelings in myself. Also, my relationships, with myself and others, have changed. In small ways, I know myself better, trust myself more, and am able to be more honest with myself and others.

So, in school we learn about change, how to help others change, how change is difficult and incremental. We have nice words about change like agency and collaboration and empowerment that don't say much about what change looks like in a life. Though the changes on the inside of me have been slight, they swept through my life like a storm. In the past year, change has dragged me under and it has kept me afloat. It has taught me about grief and about how much I can hold; it has taught me how to ask for help and what I can count on within myself.

### **Separation**

On a sleet drenched night in February, I asked you for a separation. Spit out, vomited up - it spilled out of me before I could stuff it back in. Little drips of water from my hair splash the page, blur the ink. My hands are ice-cold and salty tears cut warm tracks down my face.

Feb.21/12 Personal Journal

*I just left the man I've shared my life with for eleven years. I didn't imagine it could be this painful. Guttled. Shaking. Hurt so bad I wanted to puke. Could this really be for the best? So much judgment and self doubt running through my mind. What have I done? I have torn away my comfort, ground love into the dust, broken two hearts. For what? Is this really worth it? Keep reminding myself to be strong. All my fantasies of freedom crumble. I'm afraid and exhausted. Want to sleep. Know I will wake up to fresh pain. This feels like someone has died...How did I get here?*

Take a step back in time.



### Dec. 15/12 Personal Counselling

*... I talked about feeling stable, assured, authentic but still feeling the emotions around me, being affected by strong emotion but without losing myself in it. Without being swept away or overwhelmed.*

*I talked about how, in my conversation with my husband, I felt different than I had in the past. In the past, I would have worried that my thoughts, feelings and impressions weren't valid and shouldn't be expressed. Or I would need to go outside myself, check out my thoughts with someone else, first. That this time, I didn't feel as though I needed outside validation. I could trust myself. That this is how I feel and that's ok. I'm not saying anything other than this is my truth.*

*We discussed that conversation too. How I owned my parts of the dance. The things I was willing to change and how I wanted to be in the relationship. I talked about taking responsibility for my choices and actions. I explained the money piece and my conversation about that. She asked how he took it and I said, it was uncomfortable for both of us. I was ok with feeling uncomfortable because leaving things unsaid and unresolved is not keeping either of us happy.*

*For the first time, I talked about being done. About moving forward with the couples counsellor but acknowledging that my hopes are not high. I said I had known for a long time that we were done but I've been hanging on, hoping he would change. Or that I would change or that we could just live with it. I talked about the practical pieces of separating, my fears for him and my guilt. I said for myself, I know there will be sadness, I know this will hurt but I feel capable of weathering that storm. I feel good in myself.*

## Loss

### Feb.29/12 Personal Counselling

*What is happening in me? Tears, laughter, moments of happiness, pride, resilience, numbness, blank stares, peace, anxiety, guilt. Oh all the little leftovers, the not- quite-changed things. I am changing but not enough...only enough to reach this place but how do I get through it? Now I have to hold on tight...to a sorry little raft of changed me in an ocean of storm. Feelings rage around me, soak me to the skin, old voices call me back. Just give in and it will all be over, no more storm. You can hold the storm inside yourself, contain it. Let it batter you from the inside, cool and collected on the outside. I have been a container of storms. When I was a little girl, I used to imagine calling forth the wind, feeding on the elements, taking their power for my own. Lashing out with it. Let it fill me up, make me invincible, wash away the pain. How could I now let the storm empower me, take me over, lend me its strength. The knowledge that I can bend with it, feel its force, join it, be in it, be, just be. I know how to ride storms on tiny little rafts.*

*I saw my counsellor again this morning. She helped me to believe that my raft is real. I was pretty sure the storm was real and it is a hurricane. I have been in danger of trying to suck it in. I have been at the balancing point between two worlds.*

*Poised on the point of a needle. Just so. Just so it doesn't quite break the skin but it threatens, I feel it's sharpness on the soft ball of my foot, pressing, pressing. I am trying to accept my in-between-ness. Accept myself as I am. Hurting. Uncertain. Certain. Certain but pulled precariously close to the edge; our old dance draws me in with a siren song.*

Feb.22/12 Personal Journal

*Woke up this morning at 5:00 a.m., staring at an unfamiliar ceiling. Slept for 6 hours. The pain didn't slam into me like a ton of bricks. It seeped in slowly, a creeping gas, winding its way about me, breathed in to the pit of my stomach. I think of the movie we watched....together. We've always liked to watch movies together. The Last Samurai. It was a stupid movie, we laughed at it together. I remember wondering how a man could commit Harakiri. Willingly fall on the knife and then reef it up to his heart through the tough bone and cartilage. What violence. This feels like a great violence, a bleeding gut wound.*

*Stayed at a friend's place last night. She fed me, turned on music, let me be what I needed to be. Incoherent, in shock. Feel like I should get up. Go home, shower. Feed the cats. Can I keep myself from trying to fix us?*

*Negative thoughts, anger turned inward. I say to myself how selfish, stupid I am. How ridiculous and self indulgent all this therapy has been. I ask myself what games I've been trying to play. I am trying to be kind too. Meditated last night and it helped me to sleep.*

Two days after I asked my husband for a separation, our good friend died. She was just a couple of years older than me. She drove her car into a meridian – drunk and high. She'd been in an abusive relationship for some time and kept trying to leave, saying she was going to leave. Off and on, I tried to help her.

When I hear the news, I am silent at first. I pick up a broom and start sweeping the kitchen floor – numb, mechanical. Then I start screaming, screaming out my anger at this man who stole her life, at the friends and family who stood by. Screaming at life, the universe, God, whatever is out there; screaming at the unfairness of it – how dare you do this to her?! How dare you do this to me?! Then I cry. Cry until there are no tears left and I am numb and limp with exhaustion. My husband is there, he is devastated. I tell him I'm sorry, I have nothing to give him. I think if I had something left, I wouldn't give it. I'm afraid it would reconnect us. So I leave the house and just drive.

### March 15/12 Personal Journal

*I am at the gym early, staring out the windows of the dance studio. I feel tired, numb. I don't want to engage with anyone. As I look out over the snow, I see a small black shape. My eye slides across it. I refocus, find it. It's a single black fox. One of the pair I saw last week. And this reaches deep into my chest and pulls out the grief. I think it's strange that it's not the barren baseball fields, the dirty snow, the horseshoe pits standing up like ordered tombstones; it's not the grey clouds scudding over a luminous grey sky or the scrawny, barren trees. These do not touch my grief. It's the living thing... The thought of its life, finite, neither kind nor cruel. And so I start crying. When I thought all the tears had dried up.*

*I feel like I have lost all my bearings, all sense of stability. I question my purpose, my feelings, my intentions and my new-found passion for this work. I question the importance of the relationships I have built. I feel groundless...without foundation. Yet weighted down. There are things to say and poetic ways to say them but the words are so heavy. I am bone tired in every corner of my being.*

### **Dreams.**

### March 15/12 Personal Journal

*I dreamt last night that I'd gone to get my bird tattoo...a little bird on my shoulder. Instead they tattooed huge wings on my back and the wings had skulls at the bottom. Only the outlines were done but I was devastated because it couldn't be taken back. I remember feeling hesitant to tell them of the mistake. Do I go forward and have it completed or leave it half done? Is there any way of fixing this? No. I was struck by the brutal finality of it. I came for a little change, a little symbol of my freedom and I got wings of death, harsh and sharp edged.*

### March 20/12 Personal Journal

*It's dark and I am in the water with my husband. We know we need to get to shore...it's far off and there is a storm coming. I see distant lights on the shore... I reach the shore and he does too. There's something bad there, something dangerous. We run away, down a dirt path that runs parallel to the lake. We come to a large, warmly lit log cabin – I think, it's a café or a store. There is a Chinese man inside at the counter. There are several people inside. I think we can trust these people. There are lanterns hanging inside, behind the counter. I realize it's actually a magic shop; there are magical objects there that the man is showing us. My husband fills himself with this power and he breathes it into all the lanterns and they are filled with the breath and they move and light up. Then I realize that I have magic too. But I must scream first to get to mine. And so I scream and then the breath, the wind comes and I am able to move all the lanterns too and fill them with light.*



Figure 18. Dreams No. 1 & 2.

April 10/12 Personal Journal

*We are in this bed and in this house; and we are also in the deep green woods, blue starlight filtering through the trees. And you hold me. In my dream you have a tattoo; three quarters inked, spanning the whole right side of your back. Poppies, a field of poppies and some white flowers in between, maybe they are morning glory. Yes, I think that's what they are. They're not inked; they are not white but the colour of your flesh. I stare at how the ink frames them, embraces the negative space of them. I think it's beautiful but the poppies lack sufficient detail, the morning glory is traced with beautiful lines. The poppies are painterly, impressionistic.*

*The un-inked half of your back, I remember thinking there would be a thing with two heads. I don't know what. It isn't there yet, or maybe won't be at all. Vaguely I think it might be a two-headed dragon. In the Chinese calendar, we are both dragons.*

**Waking.** This morning, I ask you if you want to take turkey dinner for lunch. You say no, you won't be hungry. I ask if you will eat today. You say no. This makes me angry. I feel as though you are starving yourself to make me feel bad. Some part of me petulantly wishes that I could do the same, show you how much I hurt by punishing my body. But it just seems....I don't even know what it seems anymore.

"I'll pack my things while you're in New York," you say.

"Ok"

"I'll leave while you're gone"

"Who will take care of the cats?" I ask.

"How can you leave me without saying goodbye?!" I think. Yesterday, we were taking a break. Yesterday, you were going south for a month to figure out what you want. Tears come and I lock myself in the bedroom. They pass quickly. I suck them back.

"I'm sorry I upset you."

"I'm sorry too."

He says, "I suppose neither of us has been trying to hurt the other."

Or maybe I say that.

"I won't leave while you're gone."

I cry and cry.

He tells me how hard it is to be here right now, how deep his depression is.

"I keep wondering if we could somehow fix this."

"I couldn't get it right in 11 years; it's not going to change now."

"Maybe I need to change. I could change. I never tried to fix me."

"Maybe you don't need to be fixed."

I cry because I don't believe that...

In these horrible, painful moments, he's kind to me. Part of me hates it. He reminds me of all the things I keep trying to convince myself of. That we both deserve to be happy; that we have tried, that this is terribly, heartbreakingly sad; that neither of us is wrong and nothing is wrong with us. We are both good but we haven't always been good to each other. This is all true but it would be much easier if I could hate you.

**Fighting.** This year, I learned about grief. About how much energy it takes; how it comes in waves; how the body titrates pain. Grief weakened my defenses; made it harder to stifle the inner critic, easier to beat myself up for not doing all the things I felt I needed to do. One of the most difficult things for me to do is not fight myself; not fight the grief and the exhaustion. I learned not to fight my need to reach out, to ask for what I need, to be comforted. I allowed myself to depend on others and trust that they wouldn't run from my pain or neediness. Because grief is unpredictable and life is unpredictable, I have learned a bit about how to relinquish control and live in the moment that is. The last wave taught me to stop fighting, to lie still and allow time to feel and time to rest.



*Figure 19.* Containment.

**Surrender.** On April 24, I'm at the Toronto airport with a friend; we're on our way home from New York. On the news, we see an explosion at the mill back home. A friend has been calling my phone all morning...I was waiting until I got home to answer because I didn't want to pay for a long distance call. I call her now. When I get through to her, my fears are confirmed, another friend has just lost her husband. I sit down heavily. I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe I have any more tears left, but the sobbing starts again. I'm grateful for the friend I have with me; we hold each other as the fires burn over and over again on the TV screens.

April 25/12 Personal Journal

*Just put one foot in front of the other and walk.*

*Spatzierien gehen. Opa's voice enters my head*

*I come from a long line of survivors.*

*If there was a god, I would ask why. I would say stop! This is enough now. This is enough.*

*I am all hollowed out inside. All emptied. Just a container for grief. Grief pours through me and this container is wearing thin. Tired. Sprouting hairline fractures.*

*Just when I think I can't bear to feel anymore, my body rescues me. I go numb.*

*What is the lesson in this? Something keeps coming to me, a gift from a friend. In an unforgiving world, we often need a reminder that it need not be so much that way as it is. How could the world be less unforgiving today?*

Apr.27/12 Personal Journal

*I hate waking up into my life right now. It's just so full of tears. The weight of it feels crushing. And yet the sun shines. The sky is blue.*

*My life feels empty, purposeless, pointlessly painful. Difficulty moving, getting out of bed let alone working on a thesis or going to the gym. So I beat myself for being depressed for letting myself slide into self pity when the loss...it's not even my loss. It's her loss. And I feel so selfish. Yes I cry for her, but I'm also crying for myself, because I am losing her support. I feel the unfairness to her alongside my own anger. I don't want any more shit and loss and sadness in my life.*

*Wake up*



Cry  
 Check email  
 Cry  
 Find will to write  
 Write words  
 Cry  
 Make coffee  
 Feed cats  
 Drink a cup of coffee  
 Take shower  
 Find clothes  
 Put them on  
 Drive to uni  
 Meet counsellor  
 Cry  
 Come home  
 Cry  
 Stop crying  
 Wade through this gap of unfilled time  
 Go to work  
 See clients  
 Transfer files  
 Put one foot in front of the other  
 Cry  
 Stop crying  
 Surrender

### **Happiness.**

#### **May 7/12 Personal Journal**

*... I'm enjoying my life as it is. Which seems very funny to say... My life is in such upheaval. I feel lonely every day. I've cried more in the past three months than I have in years and years. I feel utterly chewed up, ground meat raw on the inside. Like if one more thing tries to take me apart I will just collapse in on myself. But my life is*

*also good... I feel capable, not just of going to school or making a good living. I feel capable of living a full life somehow, like I could possibly, probably make real changes in my life. Like I know how to help myself grow now. And how to seek out help maybe too. I am surrounded by good people - people who are invested in me, and I think they like me. I like them. It seems like there is opportunity everywhere.*

May 13/12 Personal Journal

*Yesterday was better than the day before and today is better than yesterday. I was going to start at the beginning but maybe I'll start at now and work my way backwards.*

*My place looks good. I put away all the paint and vacuumed, dusted, cleared up clutter and put plants and paintings back into place. I put the spices and the dishes back on the shelves in much more pared down and organized way. It's still clutter-y kitsch but it works.*

*The yellow and green are lovely. It feels optimistic in here and warm...happy. Just the two walls done really changes the light and the feel. Just the process of painting was healing. I needed to work, to do and be in motion but at something I didn't need my brain for, just my body. My brain was pickled in grief for a while. I feel like I could have people over now.*

*So backwards. I woke up this morning and started counting the things I am grateful for. That was something that was really helping moderate anxiety for me before the great meltdown of 0'12. So, that's how I started my day. It felt quite profound. I did a body scan meditation too. Noting and finding the emotions; softening around them, allowing them.*

*Yesterday, I asked myself what I wanted this to be like - this situation, the outcome, the fix for all this pain. Is it to finish my thesis or be in Montreal doing a PhD or is it an internal state that I will bring with me? Wherever you go there you are sort of thing. And I thought, it's the latter. And this morning, there it was. Gratefulness for my life, for the people in it, even for the pain I am feeling. Where there is grief there is life and there is love. I could not hold this much sadness without having loved just as much. And where there is difficulty, where the foundations are torn down, there is rebuilding and in that rebuilding, there is the potential to create something new.*

When I wrote this, I remember feeling like I'd had the rug pulled out from under me over and over again and I just needed something solid to hang onto. This felt like an important moment, realizing that I have my gratitude and that that can't be taken. I didn't magically get better from here, grief didn't disappear overnight; it has continued in waves,

but consistently, the difficult days get further and further apart. I am finally coming to a place of being alone without feeling so lonely.

This process has taught me about change. It confirms for me how powerful tiny changes can be. In doing my own work, I learned to validate my feelings a little more, I began to feel more grounded and able to take risks. In understanding myself, I feel like I have come to have more compassion for myself and for others. And that combination of little shifts led me to set boundaries in my relationship and, ultimately, to end it, trusting that both of us deserve to be happy. Through this experience, I've also gained a visceral understanding of the costs and benefits of change. I've learned both how difficult, slow and cyclic change may be and how it can free us to live fuller, more authentic lives. I have a better appreciation now of what I am asking my clients to do when I move them towards change.

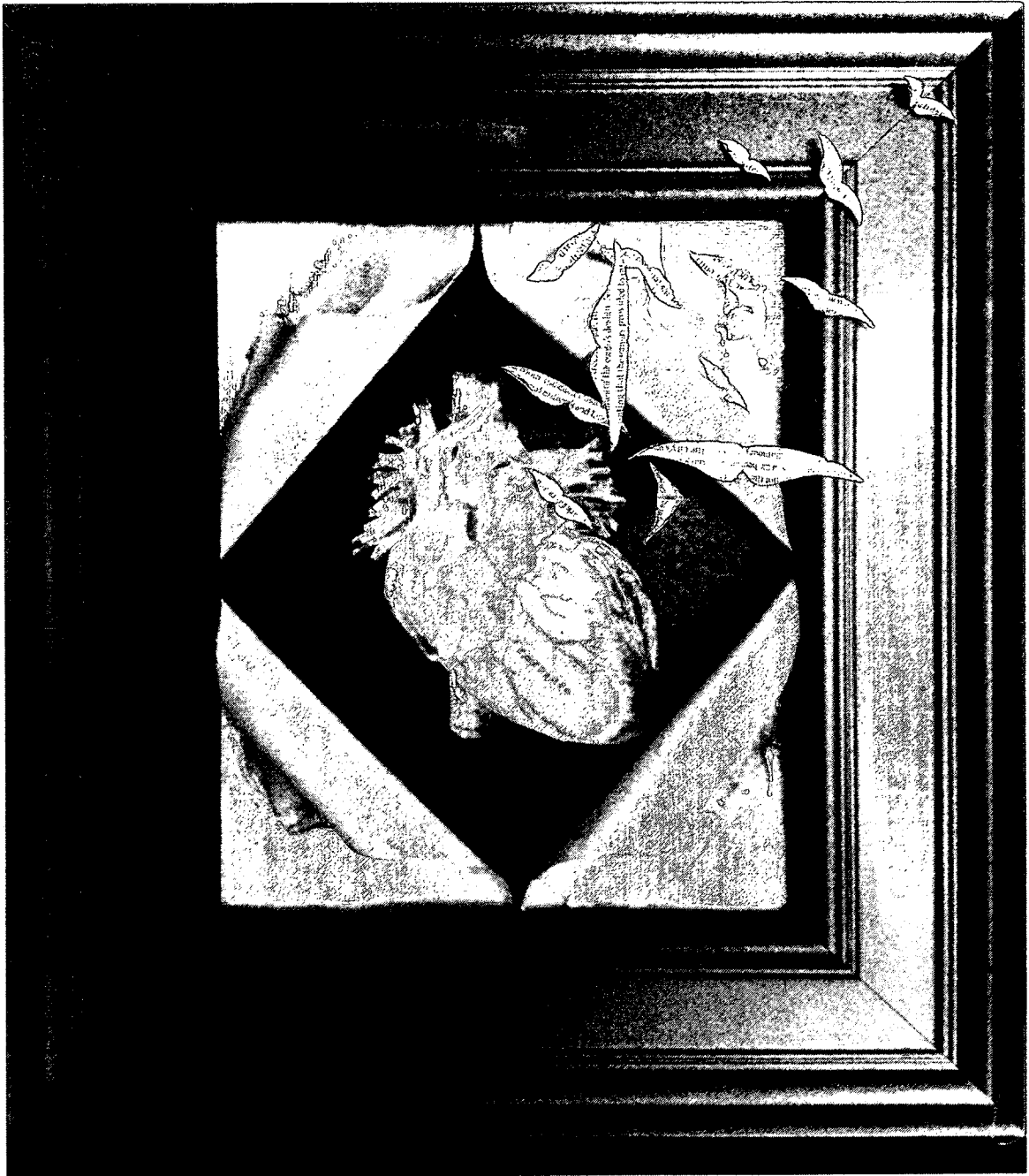


Figure 20. All the Little Words Spoken in the...

## Work in Process

Dec. 20/11 All the Little Words Spoken in the...

*I made this piece in response to my work with a client. She had used this beautiful metaphor of opening up and being afraid to 'bleed out'.*

*Looking at this first piece, the heart exposed. At the time, I felt that piece deep in my body but attributed it to my client. Her opening up, her vulnerability. There is a visceral quality to slicing and peeling back the canvas with a scalpel to reveal the heart. As I have moved through my own therapy, process group, supervision, I realize that this piece embodies my own feeling of being exposed, and how, through that exposure and vulnerability, I have set free all the little words spoken in the heart...*

In reading through these notes, it has become clear to me, that I am learning to be a counsellor by feeling what it is to be a client. While I have picked up a fair amount of information from textbooks and lectures, this isn't what stands out to me in the learning process. As a client, I have experienced what is and is not therapeutic to me and developed greater empathy for my clients' fears, frustrations, and vulnerabilities. I've noticed that there is a rich world under the surface, in the relationship, that is not explicitly connected to the presenting problem. I don't think I could have understood that from words alone. This next section explores my developing understanding of process, as a client and as a counsellor.

**Fixing.** Initially, I felt a lot of pressure to help my clients fix their problems. I felt woefully under-qualified to do this – because I am. I was taught to trust my clients to be the experts in their own lives, which sounds nice, but it took experience to turn it into something other than a meaningless piece of jargon. The learning came in layers. First, I came to understand that the people I worked with typically understood their own problems pretty well; they had been thinking about them and trying to fix them for quite some time. So, advice was not that helpful. I could easily relate to that because I don't respond well to advice either; it often seems simplistic to me and can feel condescending. Through my own experiences, I could also see that there is not much point trying to push people towards

coming up with solutions too soon. When people try to push me to action and optimism, I dig in my heels; I need to feel the less positive parts of my experience first and I want those feelings validated.

When I started my practicum, I got another nice-sounding piece of advice – don't get stuck in the problem, it's not about the problem. I nodded my head. I agreed. "Right," I thought, "not about the problem. That makes sense... So, how come I keep getting stuck in the problem?" It had the flavour of something that makes sense... of something that would fit with what I already knew but it took several months to start absorbing the idea.

***It's not about the problem.***

Nov.17/12 Group Journal

*... brought up something I'd worked on in a previous week and a group member said that she'd gone home and put together a bunch of resources for me to use with my client. I thanked her and then said,*

*"The most important part for me of bringing that situation to group was not really problem solving it but being able to say that I'd felt inadequate and panicky and not have others judge."*

*"Or have yourself judge"*

*"Right...and instead I felt very validated and supported and that was helpful."*

*I didn't need someone to solve my problem with the client; I needed to work through my fear of looking incompetent. I think these are good things to keep in mind with clients. It's not about solving a problem; it's about working through interpersonal patterns that don't work anymore. And I think that only happens by experiencing relationships differently.*

***Rescue.***

Nov.10/11 Group Journal

*...we got onto the topic of what happened yesterday, which I missed. I felt really outside, found myself feeling frustrated, zoning out and feeling really disappointed. But I didn't say anything until near the end. I'm proud of myself for saying I didn't share the excitement or connection that others had. I didn't have to do that and it did put me in the spotlight which felt uncomfortable. And I just sat with that. It was ok not to have the answers. Someone tried to rescue me. I said I don't need to be rescued and then I explained what was happening for me. That I was trying to sit with a feeling, trying to get in touch with it in my body and when she offered me an out, that shut that process down for me. Thinking about it in retrospect,*

*I was doing something difficult and it felt invalidating or disempowering maybe for her to take that away from me.... I think that was a good learning piece for me...around what might happen when I rescue people in here or when I rescue my clients.*

**Affirmation.**

Mar. 8/12 Counselling Journal

*...we talked about the thesis and I talked about how passionate I am and what I believe and she seems to really admire me and the work and is looking forward to seeing it.*

*She said also...you know you do your work right? I mean you really do your work. She talked about how most grad students she saw were barely keeping up and I'm...can't remember what she said but the implication was that I was handling the academics and doing the personal growth work too. That's nice but it means there's something to live up to which isn't always good for me. I want to have the option of going there feeling like a total failure, making all the wrong decisions and still feeling respected.*

*So, in my work I think this tells me not to get too excited about affirming in an over the top way. Judgments are judgments, positive or negative. I want my clients to feel unconditionally accepted...*

**The good client.** In much the same way I have played the good daughter and the good counsellor, I also play the good client. How fortunate that, wherever I go, there is a chance to work through this pattern. The same issues that play out in my personal relationships really do seem to replicate themselves in therapy.

Nov. 28/11 Counselling Journal

*This is the first session I've had that felt really hard. I went into session unsure of what I wanted to talk about or really where to begin with all the feelings I'm having. We talked about my marriage. Told her what had happened and how I felt about the relationship. I felt a lot of tension today. I didn't tell her I had been avoiding therapy because I feel like I failed to do something about my relationship. I guess that's important. My fear of revealing failure.*

March 19/12 Counselling Journal

*... I didn't describe the full extent of my melt down, how panicked I felt, how flooded and far from coping or even talking coherently I was. I didn't want to portray myself as having anything seriously wrong with me. Didn't want my counsellor to worry or be disappointed in me. Or to think I'm too fucked up to be a good counsellor.*

*I talked about my grandmother...always dying you know. Always wrapping people up in her feelings and somehow, I don't want to be seen as needing, and*

*somehow I believe I am manipulating people into feeling sorry for me if I tell them I'm not doing well. Even though I don't believe it too.*

*So I said that piece and felt really bad about revealing it, about wanting to work on that. Because my thought is that my counsellor wants me just to deal with the loss. Just accept myself and getting through the next little while. ...we're in a comfort zone. Not talking about what is happening between us. I wonder what we are acting out together. For me it's a pattern of showing how well I am doing, of appearing competent and capable and feeling unable to show the darker things because I don't want to disappoint or worry someone else. I am creating my well crafted image of success. I need someone to help me be courageous right now. Can she do it?*

### **Vulnerability.**

Jan.3/12 Counselling Journal

*Today I also thought about what risks I could take in session. How could I trust my counsellor more, be more present, reveal more. It was empowering to think of how I might best use this situation. But what I've been thinking is that I don't feel that connected, that I will only reveal the 'safe' things, things I don't feel scared of revealing. Today I thought to myself, I will take this deeper. I will risk myself here.*

*...I talked about how energy seems tied up in the experience even though I feel like a lot of good came out of it in a way. I said I had dug myself out of a hell of a hole, that I had come a long way, that I felt resilient and that I wouldn't be who I am today without that experience. Yet something about it still lingers...*

This is the last entry for a month and a half. In that session, I talked about something I had never talked about before. The next week, I went in and said I needed a break, that there didn't seem to be anything else to work on at the moment. I believed, at the time, that there really wasn't anything to work on even though we had opened up this whole new area. In retrospect, I can see that I must have felt vulnerable and exposed but I don't think I was conscious of that as the reason.

**Transference.** I worked with the same therapist for about a year and half, with some breaks here and there. After about six or seven months, it occurred to me that I didn't feel that connected to her. Even though I like her enough and think she's an effective counsellor



and a caring person, I didn't feel attached. As we continued to work together, I increasingly felt my irritation, anger, and fear of rejection coming into the relationship.



Figure 21. A Cluttered Basement.

#### March 28/12 Counselling Journal

*About 10 minutes before my appointment, the secretary called to say it had been cancelled. I wondered if my counsellor knew she would be away this Monday... I feel resentful, rejected...I think this is definitely my stuff. She always asks me what I want to do around booking an appointment and I sometimes wonder if this means she thinks I don't need another appointment. Again, it feels like subtle rejection to me. I guess I wish she were more inviting or encouraging.*

*I don't actually believe that she is rejecting me or that there is anything in that question except letting me make what I believe is the best decision for me. I noticed that right away when we started working together... that it puts me in a position of deciding what I need and then asking for it. This means I need to trust myself. This is not something I'm always comfortable with. I'm looking for her to tell me what's ok.*

She had to cancel our appointments a couple of times. The last time she cancelled, I stopped going back. I remember wanting her to call, to reach out to me. I wanted her to prove that I am important, that she cares about me. At the same time, I knew she wouldn't call because I'm just one of how many clients at a university counselling centre. I also know that I am adult and can make an appointment to discuss my feelings with her. All of this makes sense; none of it makes it easier to do. These are old feelings. If I had to put words to this anger, they would be, "I can't trust you. You can't give me what I need."

### **Resistance.**

June 12/12 Counselling Journal

*Hmmm.... How am I feeling? Dissatisfied? Partly. Annoyed? A little. A sprinkle of curious... a touch resentful... I feel like maybe therapy is working in spite of my therapist. Then I feel like a judgy bitch. I have some lingering anxiety...*

*...I want to tell all the parts of the story. Down to the ugly, mucky details and the anger and the pain because I want someone to hear that and not turn away. But I feel that I shouldn't. And so in therapy, I play the good daughter too. I wish she would help me tell that story.*

*I feel resentful that she doesn't. Yet how should she know? Should she know that's what I need? Instead she makes suggestions about having a dialogue with my inner child. She leads me away from my feelings of self condemnation... and into a place of educating me about making empowered choices where the shoulds don't come into it. But fuck! I've been carrying those shoulds for a long time. I've been carrying this story and these feelings and these patterns a long time. Why would I give them up just because I see, on an intellectual level, what they are?*

*I told her I felt resistant to doing the inner child thing. I told her what had been working for me. I am proud that I tried less to make everything smooth and comfortable, that I voiced my resistance to suggestions and talked what was happening for me in the moment and in relationship to her. It's a beginning. I am being different in session.*

June 17/12 Counselling Journal

*Feel like quitting counselling again. I wonder what's going on for me? I think about processing it with my counsellor, then think that somehow she won't be able to pull me through that.*

*I wish we could explore the resistance I guess, rather than her just rolling over when I say I don't want to do something... I guess I want to understand it. I*

*didn't really realize that until now. I wonder if I would feel safe to explore that with a client. Would it seem pushy? Would I do it, confident that I wasn't defending myself? I don't know. As a client, I suppose I can ask for that.*

*You know what's happening? What's playing out? I'm going into this mode of - you can't steer this ship so I am going to. I don't trust you ...so I will lead us but reluctantly. I will feel resentment, I will want out. I will say I'm taking the responsibility but I don't believe it's mine to take... Well that feels familiar. That feels like my marriage.*

In reflecting on this, I think the resistance holds the seeds of interesting work. I see themes and patterns playing out. I don't trust her. I feel vulnerable and fearful of exploring further. So I push up against that boundary and then I want to withdraw. The resistance holds information about my level of anxiety and what makes me anxious. In a positive light, it also means that I am taking a risk.

Resistance also provides information about my defenses and ways of relating to people. I wonder if, partly, I am projecting my reluctance and fear onto my therapist. Believing that she can't support me and doesn't want to explore the things I want to explore instead of feeling my own anxiety about moving forward. I feel angry and I want to walk away. That feels very familiar to me – walking away from a situation instead of feeling difficult feelings.

The resistance is also valuable in that it brings anger into the relationship. If I can process that in a way that feels safe, if I can express anger regardless of whether it is reasonable, then that is therapeutic. It allows me to step out of a restrictive role. Finally, I had some insight around exploring resistance. In the last journal entry, I want my counsellor to address the resistance – not to convince me to do something I don't want to do but to help me understand what it's about and what's happening between us. I actually want her to challenge

me in this way. Strangely, I think I would somehow feel safer because sitting with these unspoken, unexplored feelings seems unsettling to me.

**Honesty.** I often get anxious over all of my expectations for myself. To just expect myself to be honest about my experience in the moment, somehow allows me to be curious and present and more accepting of myself. I have learned that honesty does not mean complete disclosure. I am aware of and respect my need to protect myself and feel safe but I can say, “I don’t want to talk about such-and-such and here is how I feel about that”, rather than just denying its existence. Perhaps this also relates to immediacy in my work with clients. I want, not only to be able to pick up on what is happening between us, but to also have the courage to bring it up (provided the timing is right).

March 22/12 Counselling Journal

*I don’t know how we got here. I said I felt there were pieces of me locked away, that no one gets to know about. I talked about my fears of talking about the past, that I should be over it and to some degree I am but in some other way I’m not.*

*I felt afraid to talk about this issue... Why am I so afraid? What judgment do I fear in wanting to talk it through? I mean it’s my session. I’m the client. I can be as fucked up as I want to be, right? Sometimes I feel like I need counselling for my counselling...*

*... she was asking me what I needed to close the session. I said that I feel vulnerable right now. I said it probably isn’t what I need but I want to shut down all my feelings, detach from you and bolt out the door. I feel very tense and uncomfortable.*

*This isn’t the first time I’ve felt vulnerable in session. It’s just the first time I’ve been able to name it out loud.*

About a year into our work together, I began to talk with my counsellor about the relationship between us, about the patterns and themes that I notice in our relationship that are also present in some of my other relationships. It was difficult for me to start speaking more directly with her. I felt vulnerable. This step forward into exploring process feels more like one step forward and two steps back. I stick a toe in the water and repeatedly withdraw.

This is a slow change but an important one; I am trying out a different way of being in relationship which I hope is more authentic and useful than the old way.

June 6/12 Counselling Journal

*I said I've been thinking about what I'd like to work on here. She seemed interested and ...maybe surprised? Not sure. She asked what. I hedged a little, I said well last week we got into talking about my relationship and I wanted to keep exploring my part in that. She mentioned something about vulnerability coming up. I said yes and that really came up in the session too. And that's something I've been noticing about myself, that fear of being vulnerable and depending on others. It comes up in other places, in other relationships for me. I said it comes up in here, in our relationship.*

*She asked me what effect it had on my relationship with my husband. I said, I think it kept us apart. That I felt very resentful of being in control of everything yet in a way, I wanted or felt I needed to be in control. With you, I feel like I control my vulnerability too. I often just focus on what's positive for me, how I'm moving forward because I think I want to please you or not disappoint you.*

*She asked if there was anything therapeutically that I wanted her to do differently. She seemed concerned perhaps that she wasn't meeting my needs. I said no, I think this is a pattern for me with other people too. So she moved away from that and went to focusing on me which was helpful because I didn't feel I needed to take care of her then. I told her how I stopped coming to counselling in the fall because I hadn't followed through on something we talked about. I said I felt like I hadn't done what I was supposed to do.*

**The not good client.** I tell my clients that all of their feelings are acceptable, that we can disagree, that it is safe for them to express even their 'unacceptable' feelings with me. Yet, I have an uneasy relationship with conflict and anger, especially with the people who matter the most to me. In close relationships, conflict makes my stomach turn and I put a lot of energy into avoiding, smoothing over, pushing down. Sometimes, it feels like I am literally swallowing my anger and I feel sick with it, depressed; it turns against me and strips all my energy away. So, I am looking for a healthier relationship with anger and conflict. This is very much still work in progress.

Mar.14/12 Counselling Journal

*She said she heard fear. She said I used language like 'when my life falls apart'. She asked me, "is your life really falling apart"?*

*Is it? It sure feels like it in the moment, it feels like nothing is stable ground anymore. I feel lost in the loss. It feels overwhelming. I feel challenged by that question too. I suppose I feel defensive, angry maybe. Can't you see how much this is hurting? Can't you see me being destroyed?*

*But truly I am not being destroyed. I am living through this. And I am growing. But I'm angry that she would imply I'm pitying myself. I can feel it welling up in my chest. That's what I am afraid of doing - being melodramatic, helpless, manipulative with my emotions, being amplified or dishonest in what I feel. Is that what I'm doing?*

*I don't know...but what I want to say is fuck this! I'm tired of being reasonable and worrying what everyone else thinks - my counsellor, my supervisor, my peers, my parents etc. etc. This is my fucking therapy, I can be as unreasonable and emotional and pissed off as I want to be. I don't have to please anyone. I don't have to be anything for anyone else. I can be a complete, unreasonable bitch if I want to. If my counsellor's office isn't a good place to try that on, I have no idea where I'm going to manage it.*

Oct. 20/12 Counselling Journal

*Once again, she coached me towards how I can provide care to myself...*

*Not what I wanted. I feel irritated because I feel so independent, like I already take care of everything on my own. To be told I need to be more independent is a bit of a kick in the teeth. Somewhere in this emotional soup, I feel an edge of truth. I see it out of the corner of my eye but I can't look at it straight on. That maybe, there is insight to be found in this anger and resentment.*

*I think the anger is saying, "You can't hold me. You can't take care of me. That's what I need and I can't have it from you. So what the fuck am I doing here?"*

*I feel unsure about counselling right now. Is this really helpful to me? I guess it's a place to cry, to let myself feel all this shit every other week. I'm booking every other week, not weekly right now.*

*Each time I go I think that what I really want is just to speak honestly, to say whatever I feel like saying and each week I leave feeling like I've spilled my guts of everything but my anger and disappointment. Once again, I speak about nothing in our relationship and I am nice Christie, not irritated, not confrontational. If I break through that barrier, it will be the most productive thing I've done in therapy.*



Figure 22. Anger.

Nov. 2/12 Art Therapy Journal

*We're talking about this experience I had, this total melt down around not being perfect and how ridiculous and over the top and child-like it feels to me. I talk about how angry I was with myself for crying over it. You ask me to draw those feelings and then to imagine what it would be like if you were there, telling me not to get angry with myself...or something like that. I draw the confusion, the mixed bag of feelings that were there and the ones that I might feel if I weren't so angry with myself. Then I scribble in all these red and black lines, pushing back at you telling me what to do and how to feel.*

*We talk about the drawing and I explain all the mixed up feelings. Then I say, "This half, is me telling you to fuck off, because I'll feel however I want to feel about this." I'm laughing as I say it, saying it kindly, joking with you... but I am testing the waters too.*



Figure 23. Ten Things I can't Tell You.

Dec. 17/12 Art Therapy Journal

*The drawing has this hand over everything and these doors and fragmented pieces. These bricks and walls. I felt like, I can't talk about this here and now and I felt a lot of anger when I was doing the drawing. My own frustration - why am I interested in this, why am I talking about it. Just a lot of anger. There was this moment, when I was drawing when I felt this physical reaction towards her... I felt judged, I felt like I would be ridiculed, I felt this anger towards her. Which is totally out of context, I know that's not happening but it was this intense reaction towards her - just a flash of it, but very prominent. It's like I have this fear of being judged that I just threw out onto her. It was an interesting feeling. I talked a little bit about it with her, not a lot. I talked about wanting to keep her out... about feeling that flash of anger.*

*I was almost frozen in speaking about this drawing. I didn't want to look at it. There was a lot of anger and frustration and shame in there. It was not an easy*



*session. We were talking about that and she asked me how was it to talk about this, to draw this. I smiled and said, "It reminded me of this line in a book I read, 'this is psychotherapy not a tea party.'"* I laughed and said, *"This wasn't a fucking tea party...but that's ok."*

**Shifting focus.** I came into this program feeling relatively confident. I had experience with taping myself from my work on the crisis line and undergraduate counselling classes, so that didn't unnerve me. I was comfortable working with people in a counselling role. I knew Egan's model, had a nice balance of reflections to questions down pat and some solution-focused tools under my belt from working as a career counsellor. I had everything I needed to get A's in my classes. None of that was helping me to grow professionally or personally.

As we learned about different theoretical orientations and interventions, I tried to grow by absorbing as many new skills as I could but it felt overwhelming and using them often felt awkward, forced. I put a lot of pressure on myself to learn and, at the same time, I was fighting my fear of taking risks and making mistakes. Instead of feeling confident, I began feeling self critical and anxious. Working with one of my first clients helped me to start shifting my focus.

#### March 2011 Practice Journal

*I had the sense of continually trying to pull the conversation out of intellectualizing and into feeling. We did this in a succession of waves, moving deeper and then more to the surface, then back down and up again. When we were on an intellectual level, things felt confusing to me. It was harder to know what to reflect or how to follow the story. When we got to an emotional place it was easier, except the last time – there was a lot of affect. It felt scary to me. I was worried I'd overstepped...*

*She seemed to feel so vulnerable, at times I wanted to reach out and comfort her. ...she was shaky and she said she felt a bit sick to her stomach. It was like getting on a roller coaster with the slow climb to the top and then the sudden descent. I felt my own stomach clench.*

*I wanted to try some new things in this session. I thought of what narrative techniques I could bring in but once we went to that vulnerable place, it was just her and I in the moment. I had a hard time thinking about technique because I didn't want to break the connection between us. The voice of technique was somewhere in*

*the background but I silenced it and just focused on being present as best I could. I felt afraid but confident at the same time. Like I had to be competent for her and not worry about my own insecurities, if I am good enough. I gave what I had to give.*

We worked together for another five sessions. In that time, she reminded me about what drew me to counselling when I first started working on the crisis line - a feeling of focus where there is no room for all the static circling in my head because this relationship, this moment, is what is important. Her intensity drew my focus to what was happening in me, in her and in between us. I started attending more, not just to building a relationship or establishing rapport, but to the qualities of our relationship and my own reactions. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for but I let myself feel around and move out of my head and into my heart, out of the content and into the process.

**Countertransference.** Initially, I saw countertransference as something to avoid. I wanted to develop my awareness so that I could push countertransference out of the way when it came into session with me. My understanding has gradually evolved to a place where, now, I want to understand what my reactions in session can tell me about how to work with my clients. Instead of viewing countertransference negatively, I think, "as human beings we do this, we respond and interact with others in complex and often very familiar ways." So, within my relationship with a client, there are opportunities to explore, understand and shift old ways of interacting when they are no longer helpful.

April 5/12 Supervision Journal

*I asked about countertransference because of the question that came up in group, "How do you use the countertransference?" I thought that question was interesting because I'd not really thought much about using it.*

*You mentioned something about people feeling like it's something they shouldn't experience.*

*"That's it exactly," I said. "I feel like it's something I need to be aware of and then push aside, so it doesn't get in the way. But I don't think I've had a sense of what information it's giving me and I think because I've felt like it's 'bad' I'm avoiding it rather than looking at it."*

*I brought up a situation with a client- how bored and restless I feel with her sometimes. We talked about how if a client is verbose, and that brings up sleepiness, boredom or irritation, that's countertransference, something about that brings up feelings for us. For other people, that may not bring up feelings. So, we can work with that by talking about our connection to or distance from the client.*

Oct. 31/12 Supervision Journal

*"I don't feel like I'm telling him what to do just being more active in suggesting how he might resolve the dilemma... and it did move things. It brought energy to the session and got us unstuck but I realize that it also puts us into a familiar dynamic. That I'm moving into that role of telling him how to move forward instead of allowing him the space."*

*"Does any of this feel familiar?"*

*I smile, "Yes, of course it does."*

*"How?"*

*" Well...the feeling of taking over, of... 'if you're not going to do anything I will do it'...also, the frustration, the wanting to talk about what's going on and being unable to get to it. To get to the feelings, to what's really happening...It's like hitting a brick wall...a very amiable, accommodating brick wall. I feel fed up, like giving up maybe - discouraged."*

*We talked about how I might discuss what this client and I are avoiding talking about (another favorite behaviour from my now-defunct marriage). And I realize how obvious the countertransference is... I wonder how I missed it. It strikes me how gentle my supervisor is in challenging whether my shifting approach is really helpful with this client. He maneuvered around my ego pretty deftly. I want to learn how to do that when I supervise others.*

*Feelings started to surface for me in talking about this though. There were tears near the surface but they weren't threatening tears. I'm amazed at how much I've shifted over time - the trust and my ability to self disclose and to just feel without feeling so vulnerable.*

**Defenses.** The other day, I was listening to a counsellor talk about a client slipping back into her 'behaviours'. It rubbed me the wrong way a bit; there was something in the tone that suggested we were talking about a misbehaving child. It's not that I don't get annoyed with clients, because I do. But I hear a lot of talk about clients' defenses and resistance: their denial, regression, projection, patterns, behaviours, lack of boundaries, etc., and not so much about counsellors'. It reminded me that it's important to look inward and see the ways in which I'm not so different from my clients. This next entry also reminds me

that, as a counsellor, sometimes it's not so easy to look inwards either or to talk about what I find there.

#### March 19/12 Practice Journal

*...I keep thinking of this man that I worked with a few months ago. He brought in a collage he'd finished and we were talking it through. He said he had wanted to put a heart in it but the only one he could find had, "I love you Christine", written on it. I was thinking, "That's not his wife's name but it is very close to my name."*

*So I didn't know if he was alluding to feelings for me, or feeling uncomfortable because he wouldn't want me to think that. But there was something there. Something in his mentioning it was significant and I ignored it because I was uncomfortable. He didn't come back after that and didn't call for weeks. I felt bad about it but also felt angry with the client and dismissive of the work we'd done together. I found myself thinking, "He wasn't really committed to coming to counselling anyway. So it doesn't matter."*

*In thinking about it now, I still have feelings of discomfort. I suppose it would be helpful to talk about. I feel embarrassed about it though...*

#### March 21/12 Supervision Journal

*We were talking about projection...and so I took the plunge. I started to tell the story of "I love you Christine".*

*"Oh fuck," I thought, after I was about a sentence in and feeling very shift-y about the whole thing.*

*"Oh fuck, I've started this story and there's no backing out now."*

*About three seconds later I thought, "Oh fuck, I can't back out of this." So, having convinced myself, I went boldly forward and told the damn story to my supervisor. He was excited, "That's a great example for your thesis!" So that was validating. And, once again, I was all stressed out over nothing.*

*I talked about the avoidance piece for me, how I knew I should explore it but that I felt uncomfortable with it and so I avoided it. How the client didn't come back and then how my feelings really shifted. I had these feelings of irritation and disdain towards the client. I felt dismissive but really I was projecting, onto the client, my own feelings of frustration and disappointment with myself about not handling the situation well... At the time, I was aware of the anxiety it provoked but I didn't see the projection piece.*

**Being curious.** Be curious, not critical. Another mantra I have heard a hundred times and repeated to myself a thousand times more. After a year and a half, it's finally starting to sink in. The other day, I reflected on a session with a client and just let myself write about

what I felt, about how I reacted to her and what was pulled in me. I didn't worry about whether this is how I am supposed to feel, or if I feel the wrong way. I just listened and then wondered what my reactions could tell me about her and I and about how we might work together.

Jan.3/13 Practice Journal

*I find myself wanting to take care of her, to gather her in and hug her, tell her it will be all right, tell her how smart and talented she is. I have this sense that maybe she is testing out my boundaries or just whether I will be there for her, whether she can trust me. She leaves me this email asking me to please help. She knows I am away from work and she has a safety plan in place. I pick the email up at night and have trouble sleeping. I keep imagining that she has taken pills; that she will email me back and tell me; that I will have no way of getting in touch to get her help or that I will end up calling her from home, meeting her at the hospital. I will be either powerless or boundary-less. All of these fantasies, while stressful, also have this nurturing feel at their core; I want to rescue this young woman.*

**Regression.** This program has sometimes felt de-stabilizing. I came in feeling relatively confident; I had a stable professional identity and had built a reputation in my community as a dedicated and competent practitioner. I worked hard to be excellent at my work. In a way, I feel like I regressed the minute I started this training. My confidence decreased, my anxiety increased. At times, I have felt more childlike than adult in my need for reassurance and guidance; I attached to a supervisor like I was hanging on for dear life. I also experienced transference towards supervisors and was sometimes surprised by the intensity of my reactions – mostly positive and idealizing but sometimes not. There were times when the volume was turned way, way up on my feelings in these relationships.

Oct. 17/12 Personal Journal

*I am containing heaps of emotions right now and they feel irrational and dangerous and I think they're all going to spill over any second...and I really don't want them to. I want to be functional for my clients and I prefer not to seem like a nutcase to the people I'm working with.*

*I want to cry. I feel angry and frustrated and dismissed...and it makes no sense. I wanted space to talk about my feelings. And I feel guilty about asking for the*

*space. About asking for too much. I feel on the verge of freaking out because I'm not getting what I need right this instant. This is crazy.*

With time, I've noticed my confidence returning and my relationships with supervisors becoming more realistic, more based on who they really are than what I need them, or imagine them, to be. More often than not, I feel pretty good about the work I do. More importantly, I feel much more comfortable discussing what doesn't seem to be working. Just when I was feeling good about all of this, I started learning to do couples and family work and began co-leading a process group. My confidence crumbled. As I write this, I am still struggling to understand what is happening to me. I feel frozen in this work and unable to co-lead or co-counsel in these new situations. Despite all the work I've done, I feel like I am right back where I started. I am working very hard to be curious about this and not critical.

Oct. 18/12 Supervision Journal

*I said I was really emotional and didn't want to talk too much so that I could feel together for our family. So we debrief afterwards and, within a minute or two, I start crying.*

*"I just feel awful that I'm not stepping in with this family and the group...I feel frozen."*

*"What do you think you need?"*

*Silence....I can't articulate anything.*

*"Come on...just spit it out," you say, smiling.*

*I can tell you're trying to help me laugh. I laugh... but I still don't know what to say. Somewhere in here, I think I do know what to say but I can't – can't get to it and can't let it out. It's attached to all these feelings that I don't want to lose control of.*

*"I guess I'm just overwhelmed and being hard on myself, I'm trying not to be but I'm upset with myself for being afraid...then that makes it worse. It just feels so shitty to feel like my self confidence is all over the place."*

*I said, "I used to feel confident and good at my job and now it's just a roller coaster all the time."*



Figure 24. Silence.

*You reassure me, "You are good at this, very good at it - you just need to own it."*

*"I feel bad about being so anxious and fearful...the fear isn't new; this feels like somehow stepping back in time. It's so frustrating!"*

*I was talking about back in time with regard to learning counselling but it's back in time in other ways too. These are old feelings. I can't stop crying - not really messy crying, just consistent leaking. "I feel vulnerable and needy right now and I don't want to!"*

**Relationship in practice.** I've been working with this client for over a year. We've addressed the initial problem that she came to therapy with and, at this point, she says she wants to work on expressing her feelings and putting herself first, rather than everyone else in her life. She rarely misses a session, perhaps one or two in the time we've worked together, when she seemed to be legitimately sick. Recently, she missed two sessions in a row, following a particularly emotional session. I've also been having this strong impression

that she wants to live up to my expectations and is feeling stress around this; however, she says this isn't the case. I feel concerned for her and about the work we've done together lately, wondering if I have pushed too much. So, I decide to try something new. We've talked about working with art before, so I bring materials to session hoping that we'll move to a feeling place in a less threatening way; perhaps the artwork will hold the feelings, will bring them up and still keep them at a bit of a distance.

#### Dec. 11/12 Practice

*...as we debriefed the artwork, she began talking about her frustration with me. How I keep pushing her towards her emotions but she can't get to them, can't feel them in the way she thinks I want her to and so she feels like she's doing it wrong. Like I'm saying I'm not satisfied with the way she's doing things. She says that, if we weren't in this relationship, that outside here, she's sure we would be friends. So I become just another person she needs to take care of.*

*...I was aware, in the moment, that it was therapeutic for her to express her anger. That we were doing exactly what we needed to, working on her goal of expressing difficult emotions with the people she is close to. I was aware of trying to be as open and non-defensive as I could; eliciting her feedback, reflecting what she was saying to me. I was trying to show her that I will not fight back or abandon her if she is angry with me.*

*... I also said to her that I think I made a mistake in the previous session. (I affirmed a risk she took when she wouldn't or couldn't do it for herself). I said that I felt happy for her but that what's more important is how she feels about herself. And if she's not feeling that, then that's something for us to explore.*

*...What stood out to me most was how real the moment was. Not me playing therapist and her playing client but each of us feeling and being real. It felt very powerful. I felt like I am usually safe in my role, that I get to be pulled back, not vulnerable, neutral. But in this moment, I felt how much I mean to her. I felt my own guilt at having, perhaps, hurt her unintentionally. Still, I tried to keep my guilt out so she wouldn't have to take care of me. At the same time, I wanted to acknowledge that there was something I didn't handle as well as I could have and that it seemed to affect our work together. It was a balancing act in the moment and also a beautiful process to experience with someone – that instead of talking about her troubles, we did something differently together in the moment. I wonder if it felt as important to her as it did to me.*

I feel my own work echoed in my work with this client. I wonder, if I weren't working on accepting and expressing my own feelings, would I understand this in the same



way? Would I see her expression of anger as helpful and therapeutic or would I own it and feel the need to make everything better, to fix our relationship, smooth things over? I can feel both perspectives, both pulls, within me.

Dec.11/12 Supervision Journal

*I talked through the session in supervision. At first, I just processed verbally, got the story out because I could feel it in my body, all the mixed emotions, the happiness that something important had just happened and my uncertainty and guilt. I talked through some of the parts I was hesitant about, my intent. Then we reached a place of silence. You asked me what was still getting to me. I think that was a good question, you let me push myself, let me do the work. I think I need to do that with this client. Anyways, I said what I was holding back. That I think maybe I've pushed her to meet my own need to feel effective. So we talked about that for a while. What to do with it. I said that, for me, I think talking about it is doing something because it moves it out into the open, into awareness where I can see it and make decisions about it instead of acting it out. I said, there's this piece for me of wanting to be creative in my work and wanting to find a voice as a counsellor but I need to weigh that need out and make sure the timing and the choice of intervention is right for the client.*

*I felt vulnerable talking about this but also good. That I could recognize my needs and talk about how that affects my work. I could accept those parts of myself.*

## Chapter Five: Endings

Jan.2/13 Personal Journal

*I realize now how much work this has been. How much analysis and introspection, how many feelings I've allowed to well up and pour out. The work of feeling and expressing instead of shoving it all under the rug. I am proud of myself and this work.*

### Uncovering Identity

I started out afraid that I was not a counsellor. Consciously, and I think sometimes unconsciously, I struggled with how I would make myself into a good counsellor and how I would hide the pieces of myself that didn't fit. As I review all of my notes and journal entries, I realize that I am not 'the good counsellor' and, at this stage in my development, I am okay with that.

**Playing with my shadow.** Throughout this program, I've had a strong desire to let go of a false self and be more authentic and connected in my relationships with others. As I thought about inviting in the disowned pieces of myself, I anticipated difficulty; I feared finding something I couldn't accept or deal with. The reality is I've been quite focused on what I don't approve of or accept in myself and that preoccupation with what isn't working, sometimes overshadows my strengths.

I began working with an art therapist in the fall and have been delighted to work in a very intuitive and creative way. We've played with dreams and images and old feelings and wrapped up in there I found something unexpectedly powerful.

Dec. 5 Dreams

*I am kneeling on the lawn at my grandmother's house, tending to this plant. It has bright red bell peppers on it. There is a sculpture on the other side of the lawn – shiny and blue. The sculpture is disguised. I know that it looks like one thing from the outside but really it is something else. It looks like a little tractor. I think that if Oma knew what it really was she would be angry. Then this man comes up to the front door. He's a very large man, tall, broad shoulders and he is Aboriginal I think. He reminds me of a client I see. No one who knows us comes to the front door. I feel concern for him but also like I need to keep him out of the house. As Oma answers the*

door, I stand between her and the man to stop him from entering. I turn him away but I give him two of my red peppers. I cut up the remaining pepper and keep it for myself. I think to myself that, even though they are valuable to me, they are a poor gift.

#### Dec.7 Art Therapy Journal

I drew from the dream and the thing that filled the page was the blue sculpture. It took on a meaty, fleshy form. It was not this in the dream; in the dream it was shiny, smooth - like plastic or metal maybe... Then I drew the pepper plant, the peppers look like tongues or hearts. You ask me to free associate about the peppers.



Figure 25. Dream No.3.

The plant, I've cared for it nurtured it. The colour red, rich, like passion, like love. Energized, warm. I know the fruit is healthy for me, it's something I want to eat, to feed myself. It's sweet. Yet I give it away to this man. A gift for him because I don't want him to feel rejected... and because I don't want to feel like I am rejecting.

The sculpture in the drawing feels strange to me, its heaviness. I talk about the quality of it in the dream. There is something impish about it...it has disguised itself...it is something hidden. I know it isn't the tractor it pretends to be but something else. But what else doesn't come to me in the drawing only this teasing quality. I say there is not much emotion in the dream but there is. I smile. I like this teasing quality I say. Like this little statue has pulled the wool over everyone's eyes.

*We talk more and I just can't remember what the object was though I'm sure I knew in the dream and just after waking. I say then that it reminds me of the Dali painting, Cannibalism in Autumn. I liked the weirdness of it. As I am getting up to leave I say, "That's it!" I remember the secret the blue thing is hiding; it's not a tractor really, a tractor is something you work with. The blue thing is something that plays, not something that works but it's fooling everyone."*

*This seems momentous to me, it's like I found my sense of play again and my unconscious mind is playing with me, teasing me. Telling me to play. As I drove down the hill, I decided to get my hula hoop and take it to the gym to play. On the drive, I felt full of energy; I felt how much power lies in this playful enthusiasm. I left therapy not crying and exhausted but elated. This is the work too.*

Jan. 18/13 Art Therapy

*I started drawing from the old drawing...the one before Christmas that was nearly impossible to reveal. It was a process of sifting through layers... figuring it out. The background became the anger that I let my therapist see and the new safety and grounded-ness I felt in that.*

*Then I draw in the hornet in a fanciful way. But, I think, it wasn't a playful thing. There were times when it was ugly. So, I framed that image so it felt like the part of my experience that I show to others. I framed another picture behind. It feels like a mirror full of symbols: me and my mother, the pepper plant from my dream. Tangled lines of confusion surround it. But they want to be fanciful, playful. I add a black border to the things un-talked about...the ones that feel yucky.*

*I think to myself that I need to find my center. I need to understand what I need from this. So I draw in the lotus flower, it floats, disembodied at the top. Then I think to myself that maybe this is only so big because it's all been pushed underground. And so I put the horizon at the top, give the lotus flower ground.*

*I drew little circles on the frame, just because they needed to be there. Then I drew wheels so the frame became a carriage. I thought the carriage needed something. It came to me that, "oh!" the little dragon is there drawing the carriage. I was thinking of the little tongue of flame, "blech" coming from his mouth and I started smiling and I felt light hearted. I was thinking of the playfulness of this little creature and at the end I was sort of giggling to myself and thinking...this has only become this epic fantasy, this tale of my life because it's been pushed under the surface for so long that it's grown a life of its own. It's like a monster under the bed. Maybe...there's nothing here to worry about. Maybe this isn't serious. I felt sort of a silliness that maybe I was a little embarrassed of but it was such a light-hearted playfulness that it was ok.*

*I can't explain how transformative that experience of drawing in the little dragon with its little puff of flame was...and I guess my unconscious pull throughout to draw the image, the whole scene in this very fanciful way is interesting.*

*I was thinking as I talked about it... and I cried ... I never thought transformation would come in this way. I've been looking for change...I've been looking for the transformation and I never thought that this is how it would come.*

*That I would embrace the lightness and silliness in me. And...I liked everything under the surface. I said, "You know, it's so dense and so complex, there's so much shit in here (laughing), and it's cluttered and it's kind of crazy and I like it! Ummm...it's kind of quirky and it makes me who I am. Not that that moment defines me but the quality of it now... And this feeling of my heart opening. And to be able to just take this thing and transform it with that lightness. It was so surprising."*

*Then I was able to talk about this story really bluntly. I said what it was and that it was pretty ugly and fucked up sometimes. But it didn't feel heavy as I talked about it. I cried but more with a sense of feeling compassion for myself. I felt for the suffering I experienced at the time and for how long I held on to it without knowing how to let go. I finally cried for myself. It was like the story was closed to me, sealed off, and I opened it with this sense of playful kindness and acceptance. I finally let it go.*



Figure 26. Playing with my Shadow.

It strikes me how effortless it seemed, in the end, to heal this story. All I needed was the right key to open the lock. That sounds simple but it took a long time to find the key; I searched many places, some of them difficult to get to. It also occurs to me how I could never have set out, in a straight line, to solve this problem. This is the least linear kind of process I can imagine. The solution came from within my unique way of knowing; from who I am. Others helped to facilitate this journey, gave me tools along the way, helped me to explore my inner landscape but, in the end, I gathered those pieces and melted them down to forge my own key. This is all very recent but I think there is another layer of understanding in this about how I can work with others. Perhaps, another layer of realization of how I can't fix, can't possibly problem solve for someone else; another layer of acceptance of the ambiguity of this work.

When I started this thesis a year ago, I imagined a process of constructing an identity. As I see it now, I have experienced more of a process of uncovering of who I am and allowing myself to flourish and grow into my role as a counsellor; not in a prescribed way but in my own way. This has felt less like building and more like letting go; letting go of a 'should be' identity, to become more authentic and accepting of myself. Along the way, I bumped into the places where the 'should be' identity was not working for me and the anxiety and frustration of that motivated me to explore who I am and uncover some of the parts I was afraid of. In those dark, dusty, well-defended corners, I found some wonderful surprises.

I am delighted to find that this sense of play is beginning to infuse my work; it lights me up from the inside and transforms the hurts I have held on to. I get the sense that my playfulness emerged in spite of me. Maybe, in this process, I created some holes in the fabric

of fear and now, undeniable pieces of me are surfacing through the gaps. I didn't need to dig them up; I just needed to give them a space to come through. Like grass sprouting through cracks in the sidewalk. Maybe this expression of life is undeniable in all of us and just seeking a place to come through the cracks.



*Figure 27. Holes in the Fabric.*

### **Intentions**

I remember a moment last winter, mid-way through making this autoethnography, when I was considering again, whether this was worth writing and what it is all about. There were many moments of self doubt in this process; in this way, doing autoethnography mirrors my experience of becoming a counsellor beautifully.

Feb.4/12 Personal Journal

*A couple of years ago, I set the intention that I would live with honesty, creativity and compassion and I hoped that would guide me in my career. I was never sure if that was quite right. But I thought, if I can live in this way, if whatever I am doing is aligned with that intention, then I will be headed in the right direction.*

*I find myself now living, or aspiring to live, in that way. I have made a conscious effort to be honest in what I express, I have opened up and taken on an endeavor (in doing this thesis) that will stretch my creative capacity and I have worked on developing self compassion, and through that, greater compassion for others.*

*And, in this moment, a thought came to me about what this thesis is. So, I set this intention to guide me ...This thesis is an act of gratitude, of expression and of giving to others what I have received.*

In this writing, I have focused on my own perspective and written with my own voice. Beyond little snippets of remembered dialogue, you hear few other voices here. This was done partly to protect the people who have been part of my story; I did not want to speak too much for them. In doing this, I wonder if the story sometimes focuses too much on the challenges I have faced and not enough on the support I have received. So I will say here that my life has been absolutely blessed with people, past and present, who have gone out of their way to support me.

I am surrounded by people whose passion, generosity, creativity, acceptance, and ability to be vulnerable encourage the same in me. Through these relationships, I have gained a wealth of skills that will help me in my work with clients. I learned to sit with intense emotions, in myself and others; I have a better understanding of the change process and greater attunement to my own emotional and intuitive knowing. I have more empathy for my clients' experience and I know myself better. I've given myself permission to be imperfect, take risks and trust and depend on others. At the same time, I've learned to trust myself more and set healthier boundaries. In relationship, I am becoming more genuine, accepting, and understanding of myself and others; these sound suspiciously like Rogers' conditions for



change. Again, those were just words in the beginning, but this process has breathed life and depth into them.

Likewise, I hope that this autoethnography breathes life into the understanding of counsellor identity development; that, in some small way, my voice adds dimension to the existing literature, humanizing an experience within this humanistic field. My own story carries many of the themes identified in the literature, for instance: feelings of anxiety and insecurity; accepting ambiguity; integration of intellectual and emotional learning; critical incidents in which my personal and professional lives have overlapped and affected each other deeply; and personal growth and transformation. I hope that I have opened enough of my experience to you that you can see more than just common themes in an abstract discussion, have more than an intellectual understanding. For those outside this field, I hope you have been drawn in; that through the window my experience you have glimpsed a unique culture. For those within this culture, I hope you feel a little more normal, a little less alone and perhaps, inspired to share your own story in whatever way seems best to you.

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