

Cognitive Analysis of an Autoethnography

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Abstract

This is an autoethnography project and consists of five stories in short story literary format chosen from events that had significant influence on my personal development. The stories are accompanied by a brief synopsis of the information processing account of cognitive theory. The theoretical component is followed by an analysis of the stories from the cognitive perspective thus producing a novel means from which to explore cognitive theory and cognitive therapy. Autoethnographies have the effect of examining how human experience is endowed with meaning therefore examination from a theoretical standpoint serves as a solid foundation from which to expand on initial interpretations and experience from the autoethnography alone. This project is an attempt to combine the personal with the scholarly and is a means towards blurring the illusionary division between scholarly and personal/evocative writing.

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Acknowledgment

To my loving wife. You are my ground and my star.

Not to mention really hot.

Autoethnography: Introduction and Rationale

This project is my attempt to create and share something that is meaningful, personal, and reflective of our shared humanity. Specifically, the project that I have constructed is an autoethnography. An autoethnography, in basic terms, is an autobiography which is scholarly in nature in that not only is the author a full member of the social phenomena being studied, but also he or she is committed to an academic agenda such as improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, what is unique in terms of autoethnographic research is that not only is the author the participant of the research but the author is the research (Lapadat, in press).

Social science is in a perpetual state of change and innovation, expanding and diversifying, so it is relatively recently that the autoethnography emerged as legitimate form of social science (Anderson, 2006). An autoethnography is different from canonical forms of social science, such as the traditional ethnography, because canonical forms are intellectual in nature with the goal being objective knowing (Anderson, 2006, Bochner & Ellis, 1996). The autoethnography, on the other hand, not only has the goal of intellectual knowing but also the goal of immersion in the data, thus allowing me to produce the type of project I want to create. Essentially, immersion within the data implies a multidimensional experience of the data, which in effect is a more human experience, and includes among others, personal, aesthetic, moral, emotional, and intellectual dimensions (Bochner & Ellis, 1996).

As a counselor, I have acutely experienced Burnier's (2006, Richardson, 1994) contention that readers and writers of social science literature suffer the consequences of sterile canonical forms of writing. The consequences that Burnier (2006) and Richardson

(1994) refer to are about the resulting deprivation of individual's in terms of experiencing the depth of their humanity through denying the personal and the emotional. As a counselor who by trade works directly and in depth with the personal and emotional, I have found the personal component is sorely lacking within the professional and academic literature. As a result, I consider autoethnography as the ideal platform because it combines the personal with the scholarly and is a means towards blurring the illusionary division between scholarly and personal/evocative writing (Burnier, 2006).

This autoethnography project will consist, in part, of five stories in short story literary format that were chosen from events that had significant influence on my development. Even though my experiences are presented in short story format the work is academic in nature, by virtue of both process and intention, in that the stories are a device with which to examine and understand aspects of human psychology such as development, trauma, resiliency and coping. The stories are accompanied by a brief synopsis of cognitive theory followed by an analysis of the stories from a cognitive perspective. The more formal style of the autoethnography component of my project is similar to what Ellis (2002), a leader in the autoethnography movement, produced to portray her experiences and response to the twin towers tragedy in New York in 2001. In essence, this ethnographic project consisting of two parts is a "heARTfull ethnography". I borrowed this term from Ellis (1999) which she used to describe an ethnography that incorporates researchers' vulnerabilities and emotions, and encourages compassion and empathy. Furthermore, this type of ethnography helps us know how to live and cope, and has the effect of examining how human experience is endowed with meaning. Essentially, Ellis's description of a "heartful" ethnography is the core intention and focus of this very personal project.

The chronological short stories included in this project are intended to reconstruct my developmental history to provide a picture of meaning construction and coping. The stories embody a constructivist perspective in line with Beck's cognitive theory of information processing. Consequently, the title of each story emphasizes the salient cognitive focus pertaining to the subsequent cognitive analysis. In essence, a recounted personal narrative is a combination of personal meaning construction and memory reconstruction (Cottone, 2007). Essentially, the stories reveal how I remember both distal and proximal experiences, but more importantly, how I construct meaning through the events and perceptions that encompass the story, which in turn leads to specific experiences that are tied to the meaning. For instance, in the first story the meaning I derive about my self is that I am worthless. As such, I co-create the experiences that are hinged upon such "meaning making". Throughout this project, I employ the social constructivist approach, which is meta-theoretical in nature, and views human reality as socially constructed (Torres, 2006).

Purpose and Value

The purpose of this work is multifaceted. For instance, this document might provide novice counselors with insight into human resiliency and potential. For the more seasoned counselors this document is a reminder of how a person can go through much tragedy yet still keep their faith and zest for love and life alive. For all people reading this document, it is in essence, a form of modeling. Firstly, it provides a vicarious experience, through my own personal example, of ways to deal with the often tumultuous vicissitudes of life. Second, counseling clients are required to tell us their deepest darkest secrets and I salute and honor their courage and bravery by sharing my own, and thus modeling the courage of sharing personal information.

This project also has value on a more personal level. First, the evocative nature of producing this autoethnography will be helpful for my own development as a counselor (Vajda, 2007). Indeed, it is believed that such writing is similar, in effect, to what occurs when a counselor seeks growth through seeing another therapist (Alsop, 2002; Vajda, 2007). Essentially, in both situations the result is an exploring of personal fears, biases, and triggers. Ideally, the inner exploring that comes about through the writing has the potential to result in enhanced awareness, resolution, and integration of personal issues such as traumas, and perceived shortcomings. Accordingly, through this process of reflection and self-examination, I anticipate that I will become better able to bracket my own feelings and experiences when counseling others, and also to utilize my own experiences as a resource to reason about and empathize with the experiences recounted by clients.

Finally, the overarching purpose of this work is to entice individuals to engage in cognitive therapy, therapeutically or professionally, through this personal and concrete form of exposure to cognitive therapy. It is my experience that individuals often shy away from cognitive therapy because of its complex aspects, so it is my hope that this very personal and concrete description of cognitive theory will inspire more individuals to pick up the cognitive torch.

Method

I chose these stories because they are representative in terms of the experiences that I was having in the particular stage of development in which each story occurs. These stories are representative for me in that the emotions evoked within me by each experience, according to memory, were frequent in occurrence (except the fifth story). Furthermore, the stories as they progress demonstrate how the experiences that I had within my social context

led to the co-creation of particular realities and developmental trajectories. The term “co-creation” is employed to encompass the social interactions and social processes that two or more people contribute to, thereby forming a particular experience. This example of co-creation can provide counselors with deeper insight into how an early experience can affect life choices and how the outcome of those experiences can shroud in shadow both the pain and the true potential of a human being. For example, if a person has difficulty reading which may lead to social interactions that result in shame and avoidance, the consequence could be school failure. This alienation from school can lead to the individual embracing antisocial behaviors, for instance joining a gang. In this case, the conceivable outcome could be criminal conviction. Conversely, if this same individual has social interactions that create the experience of support and care in response to the reading difficulty, an entirely different outcome is conceivable. Finally, I offer my stories as hope for healing and wholeness to those who have experienced similar tragedies through demonstrating that we as human beings ultimately decide who we are, who we will become, through the power we have to choose adaptively and the power to create.

The first story I reconstruct is about an experience I had in early childhood. Writing this story was difficult and I was riddled with anxiety and resistance throughout the journey. For instance, I inherited my parents’ shame, in addition to being taught to never reveal the family secrets or what goes on in the family home. My purpose for writing this story, indeed this work, is that it is a “shame shattering” endeavor. Ideally, this shame-shattering exercise is not only for me but also for those readers who have unjustly had blame and shame forced upon them by more powerful others.

The second story that I share took place several years later in middle elementary school. The purpose of this story is to demonstrate how the dysfunctional experiences that I encountered in early childhood and my negative feelings and thoughts about myself gained momentum and were snowballing into an avalanche of pain and despair. The overall theme of this story is one of victimization and desperation.

The third story again moves forward several years to a point at which I made the decision to stop being a victim. Nevertheless, even though I made that decision and tried to establish a sense of personal power and self-respect, the utterly dysfunctional beliefs and perceptions that I continued to develop turned me towards a path of self-destruction.

The fourth story again moves forward several years to the time in my development at which I have made choices and had experiences that facilitated the unraveling of the dysfunction that characterized my everyday life. Essentially, this story demonstrates the real possibility of healing after dysfunction and indicates the momentum that is generated by the realization of my personal value and power as a human being.

The fifth story demonstrates the reality and the depth of my personal healing and accordingly demonstrates the reality of how I have also realized my personal potentials and my ability to cope adaptively in difficult situations. The focus of this story is about how I constructively dealt with my personal journey with cancer diagnosis and treatment, while simultaneously continuing to work, maintain meaningful relationships, and continue to go to graduate school.

The next section to this project is the presentation of a synopsis of the cognitive theory of depression. This synopsis, although brief, provides sufficient information to construct a solid understanding of the cognitive processes involved in depression. Aspects of

cognitive theory that are covered include the theory's evolutionary basis, the cognitive triad, cognitive schemata, and the cognitive hierarchy. Interestingly, I am presenting the same knowledge that I was armed with when I first started my battle against depression.

The final component is to analyze the five stories from the cognitive perspective. To elaborate, the stories in and of themselves paint a dramatic picture of significant events in my life that had significant impacts on my development. Consequently, the stories serve as concrete and "visible" representations of events and experiences in my life. In contrast, to the events and experiences contained within the stories, the cognitive processes that occurred are less visible and require informed interpretation to come to reasonable conclusions about the cognitive phenomena that took place. Through the stories and theoretical synopsis provided, the intention is to provide the reader with a reasonable construction of a cognitive map outlining a realistic account of the cognitive phenomena that led to my depression in addition to the process that led to its abeyance.

Ethics

As a relatively new phenomenon, autoethnography and the ethical issues and guidelines to be considered in such an approach are still in flux. Consequently, in addition to familiarizing myself with the latest ethical recommendations (Ellis, 2001, 2007), I presented this project for approval to the university ethics review board. The steps I have taken to protect identities include the approach of using pseudonyms for all persons and places. Furthermore, I have fictionalized certain events, places, and persons within the stories. Any resemblance of the characters to any person, living or dead, is strictly coincidental. For instance, references made to my foster mother may actually have been my aunt or one of my many caretakers. These steps allow the purpose and value of the work to remain intact while

preventing any one individual from being identified through association to place, an event, or myself.

In terms of protecting my relationships and myself, I have thought things through very carefully. Although I present some sensitive information about myself in this project, it is my intention to publish a much more in depth autobiography in the future. Consequently, this project is my opportunity to prepare for writing my autobiography, not only by getting valuable writing experience, but also through learning how to write autobiographically in an ethical and responsible manner.

Summary

I chose to do an autoethnographic project for the reason that it provides me with a platform to create and share something that is meaningful, personal, and reflective of our shared humanity. As an autoethnography, this project is scholarly in nature in that I am committed to an academic agenda, including improving theoretical understandings of social phenomena. On a personal level, for me, this work, in addition to being an exercise in being uncomfortable and vulnerable, is an attempt to pass on a message of hope and comfort to people who have gone through similar experiences. The content presented, especially in my earlier life is both painful and shame filled. Exposing myself in such a way is a “shout out” to all people that we are not what happens to us nor are we our behaviors. As such, we are not victims of the past or present but rather creative beings capable of constructing the life we want; even with the inevitable bumps in the road and roadblocks that we encounter. Ultimately, this work is my movement to take responsibility for who I am as a creative being by helping others to discover, in a concrete fashion through this work, that they are also creative beings with autonomy over the experiences they construct. For myself this work is a

movement towards honesty, integration, and authenticity but most of all autonomy, in that unlike my past, I now know that only we as individuals can truly decide our worth and our truth.

Story 1: Development of Core Beliefs

I was aglow inside. It was the type of glow reflecting sweet innocence and an intuitive awareness of unlimited possibility held by the brilliant late August morning. I was living in and for the moment, as children are apt to do. The sun was low on the horizon and had not yet devoured the coolness of the morning. I relished the contrast of cool morning air flowing in my mouth and lungs while the warm rays of sunlight heated my back. I marveled at the world like only a child of four can and wondered by what magic my elongated shadow existed and what mysterious power it possessed. I stomped my joy with exaggerated strides marveling at the popping sound my sneakers made on the pavement.

The magic and freshness of life thrilled and exhilarated me to the point that I felt almost immaterial. The feeling was weightlessness, as if gravity did not exist. I was certain that I could fly and that at any moment I would be floating up and off the sidewalk. It was always a genuine surprise when this did not happen. It did not matter though; I was flying like Icarus on the inside. I could feel the aliveness and presence of Jesus in all things. My mother had taught me that God was in all things and always watching; I'd better be a good boy.

We walked up Paradise Avenue, which always seemed to be busy no matter what time of day it was. My parents had taught me to fear this avenue, not wanting me to be hit or run over by a car. The specter of fear was absent today; I was too busy looking at all the different vehicles trying to decide which one I liked best. Mesmerized by a cherry red '69 Camero that thundered by, I strained to turn my neck, walking forward but facing backward, fascinated by the sight. I lost balance when I tripped over my own feet, but was saved from a fall by my mother's clutching grip. "Ella," (come!) she snapped, unable to hide her

annoyance. The sting I felt in my hand and heart quickly dissipated by the awesome sight and sound of a transport truck passing us by. I felt the vibrations going through me like waves as it passed by and was awed by the rush of wind that followed. I hoped I would find a toy truck at Penelope's house.

There were four of us in my family including my parents, my brother, and me. My father was away, as he often was, working in a camp. I did not miss him; I don't think any of us did. Maybe his absence was why I was so happy on this particular day. I did not have to see him fight with my mother over his cheating relationships or see him beat her into submission to get the last of the grocery money to use for gambling. I did not have to endure lashings from his belt because of playing too loud. Best of all, I did not have to endure the crushing feeling in my heart and chest each time he called me. He did not call me by my name or "son," but rather "fatso" for obvious reasons or "gorilla" because I was so ugly. The contempt with which he called me by those horrible names burned wounds into my soul.

My brother and I were inseparable best friends and both looked forward to growing up and becoming police officers. He was one year older than I, but everybody thought that I was the older of the two. We both had dark hair, big eyes, and olive skin characteristic of the classic Mediterranean appearance. Often people would confuse us for twins because we looked almost identical except for the fact that I was about an inch taller and about twenty pounds heavier. My parents often shamed him for being the older brother yet looking like he was the younger one. None of that mattered right now because we were living in the moment and for the moment the way only kids can do. The power of imagination temporarily dissolves pain, fear and trauma and serves as a springboard into the infinite.

Suddenly we were there. The walk to my aunt Penelope's house, my mother's sister, was over almost as quickly as it had started. I barely felt the pang of disappointment as it quickly faded into new excitement. I let go of my mother's hand, and ran and tumbled on the grass. The green grass was still moist and cool; sheltered and protected from the rapidly intensifying summer sun by the westerly facing house. I ran and hid behind the huge poplar tree, prompting my mother to chastise me for my enthusiasm. The house was an average split-level house, rectangular in shape and small, but appeared huge to my inexperienced eyes. I ran and rejoined my family almost tasting the sky blue color of the paneling on the house. I marveled at the brilliant color; the whiteness of the stucco compared to the blue of the house and the deep emerald green of the grass. The black rough-hewn metal stair railing was cold on my small hand as I walked up the concrete stairs to the entrance of Penelope's home.

"Stamata!" (Stop it) mother hissed. Through clenched teeth, she warned, "Don't embarrass me or I'll kill you when we get home!"

Reality suddenly set in and I stifled a shudder. My enthusiasm dwindled and was replaced with apprehension instead. We were set to spend the entire day at Penelope's house and that meant that there were many hours where we were at risk of violating my mother's strict and dogmatic standard of behavior. I was afraid because no matter how hard my brother and I tried, we always seemed to do something wrong. We always seemed to do something that would end up with disastrous consequences when Mother found out. Mother justified her punishments by telling us that the punishment was for our own good and that she would not do such things unless she loved us. Personally, most of the time, I had the sense

that I was not good enough to be loved and unworthy compared to other people. I repressed my fear and pain and became a child again.

As I walked in through the entrance, I was inundated by the very ethnic scent of Penelope's home. Years of cooking ethnic foods had perfumed everything inside Penelope's home with the unique aromas of Greek culture. The inside was dark compared to the outside. It took a few minutes for my eyes to fully adjust after experiencing the brilliance of outside. I looked around at the familiar white walls of the living room and the mostly dark and earthy colors of the furnishings. As I walked in the room, I sensed the dense and heavy energy characteristics of adult living areas. I had not yet learned to discount my intuitive capacities.

"Ellatea, Ellatea!" (Come, come!) Penelope welcomed us in. Penelope was a big and foreboding woman. She was not obese but rather a tall woman, as tall as my father and just as wide. My mother appeared to be half her size. I could hear several other Greek women in the dining area. They were engaged in animated conversation. It was an exchange that was typical of the gatherings that Greek women often have. It sounded more like a "battle royal" wrestling match, where twenty wrestlers fight at once, rather than a civilized tea party. The energy in the living room was stale in comparison to what was emanating from the dining area; but it was still dense and heavy.

I felt an odd sensation of emotions, maybe shame, maybe worthlessness, maybe confusion; probably all of the above. I scarcely recognized the woman I saw standing at the entrance of the dining room. She was smiling, laughing, and talking animatedly but I could see that there was something bleak and cold behind her facade. Her smile was an empty cut; the facade I saw was not the mother I knew. I did know about social masks, however, even at this age, having learned it from my mother. She taught us that God punished those who

were bad and there was hell to pay if we misbehaved or revealed the family secrets. I shuddered at the thought. It was a mothers' holy right to punish her children so they grew up to be good men. She loved us and punished us for our own good, so we would not turn out like our father and ruin some innocent woman's life. Mother was very clear that each time I made her cry an angel would die and fall from heaven. I think that I was that fallen angel. Mother also was clear that we were to grow up to be good men. "You're not going to grow up and leave me for some slutty girlfriend are you? You're going to take care of your mother like a good man, right?" The emotional expectations did more damage than she in her ignorance could comprehend. How was I to save my mother, I would think in horror. I am just a little boy who is afraid of the world. My brother, pushing his way foreword, jostled me out of my trance.

My brother and I escaped the cacophony and the potential mauling of cheek pinching, and kisses from Penelope and the others by getting permission to go down to the playroom. We absconded through a door by the kitchen and down a dark stairway that was long and very steep. I walked down the stairs slowly and carefully, holding tightly onto the wooden banister. By the time we were halfway down the creaky wooden stairway, my brother and I were surrounded by pitch-blackness. I hated being in the dark. It reminded me of something I did not like inside me, and I shuddered. Cautiously, I continued my descent into the basement, lifting one hand out in front feeling for the cord that would turn the light on. I found the nylon cord and pulled it as quickly as I could.

The light blazed to life and filled the basement with its yellow glow. The basement was empty of other kids on this day. Penelope's kids, two boys and one girl, were visiting their relatives in a nearby town. We had the basement to ourselves, thus there was less

chance of getting into trouble. It was cool and dank in the basement but it was still a child's paradise. The unfinished basement had no windows or furnishings but was loaded with more toys than you could shake a stick at. The energy was light and airy, the type of energy that only innocence can produce. It was far removed from the dense and heavy energy of adult reality.

We spent the entire day at Penelope's house, my brother and I playing in the basement the majority of the time. Twice we went out to play in the small and empty backyard, but the heat of the summer sun made it preferable to play in the coolness of the basement. Penelope and Mother brought us our lunch that consisted of ham and cheese sandwiches, milk and cookies.

"Everyone is talking about what good boys you are!" Penelope beamed.

I was grateful and relieved to know that we had managed to avoid angering my mother up to this point. I heard my own inner voice "So far so good.....so what?" "Efharisto Thea Penelope," (Thank you Aunt Penelope) I said making sure my mother heard me thank Penelope for the lunch; my brother quickly followed suite. As they were leaving, Penelope's in the lead, my mother turned and reminded us to be "good boys" in a sickly sweet tone that was foreign to my ears. The stern look that followed was much more familiar, reminding us of the consequences of violating her behavioral standards. I put on a brave and innocent front.

Dinner came and went much the same as lunch did and we continued to play well into the evening. We had played with most of the toys and games being the "good boys" we had to be. We had managed to avoid facing the wrath of the demon. We were in the middle of our favorite made-up game called "Police" when I discovered the section of the room we had

automatically ignored all day. It was the area in the basement where Penelope's daughter kept her toys and dolls separate from the possessions of her brothers; traditional gender roles within the Greek community are sharply divided. My brother found an old mousetrap and started to play with that by setting it off with various toy figurines.

Genuinely curious, I furtively examined the toys made for girls to play with. At first, I did not find anything that was even remotely interesting to me. There was a plastic tea service set complete with all the necessary utensils. There was also a variety of baby dolls and stuffed animals, which held little allure. As fate would have it however, just as I was losing interest, I found a dollhouse with a Barbie doll in it. The dollhouse was two stories high with a pink roof and a white exterior. I opened the toy house, which folded out from the middle as doll houses typically do. The realistic layout of the home was impressive to my innocent eyes. I marveled at the downstairs, which had the living room on one side complete with chairs and couches and the other side the dining room complete with kitchen, and table and chairs. The upper floor section contained the bedroom complete with a bed and the bathroom on the other side complete with a bath and sink. I wanted to play with the toys in front of me, but with a shudder, I backed away and tried to forget about them. I was afraid of the consequences of being caught playing with girl toys.

My brother continued to play with the mousetrap while I was examining the toys on the other side of the room. Just as I approached him, he put one of the cookies from dinner on the trap and set it off. What a thrill! We laughed with joy as the cookie exploded into a million smithereens. All caution forgotten, I jumped down beside my brother, shouting that it was my turn. From then on, we took turns exploding all the cookies, laughing at the casualties the plastic army men endured from the bombardment of "cookie bombs." We

were both lost in a fuzzy bubble of pleasure that was brought about by excessive laughter. Suddenly, the bubble popped as I heard some of the women from upstairs saying their goodbyes and leaving.

I felt the blood drain from my face when I realized what we had done. "NO!", I cried, trying to recover from the kick I had just experienced in my stomach. The kick turned into the iron fist of fear as it squeezed and twisted my innards in an excruciating manner. George understood when he saw my reaction.

"We have to clean this up before Mom finds out" I said in panic having realized that it was close to time to go.

We both got down on our hands and knees and started hurriedly trying to sweep up all the cookie crumbs into piles. I felt my stomach drop and my heart rise up to my throat when I realized the futility of trying to clean up cookie crumbs off a shag carpet with our small hands. I started picking up the crumbs one at a time. George found a broom and brought it over trying to sweep up the crumbs. The broom just made the problem worse because it made the crumbs jump in all directions and spread to an even bigger area.

"We have to hide it!" he said in a desperate voice.

We proceeded to cover the mess with toys and books. I knew that it was a futile effort; Mother was coming down soon and there was going to be hell to pay. I continued picking up crumbs where they were still exposed on the rug. I was correct in my assessment that it was almost home time because mother soon came downstairs to the basement.

The nightmare began. "Tea ekamete!" (What have you done!) she screamed, as she ran over to get a better look at the mess. "We're sorry, Mama," we cried in unison. Mother grabbed me in an iron fist by the arm and before I knew it, I felt the horrible sensation of my

lips exploding against my teeth. I screamed in pain. I was not sure what hurt more, the physical pain, or the emotional trauma. I dropped to my knees, holding my face and crying in anguish. My eyes were closed so I could not see what was going on, but I could hear my brother screaming and the loud smacking of my mother's fury being taken out on my brother.

Penelope came downstairs and tried to stop the drama. "Stamata, me htipas ta pethya" (Stop it!-don't hit the kids).

Mother picked me up off the floor by pulling and twisting the hair on the side of my head by my ear where it hurts most. She then went off on a tirade as Penelope rushed off to bring my brother and me wet cloths to clean our faces.

One second we were in Penelope's house, the next we were outside walking to a black vehicle to get a ride home. I was in a dazed stupor and groggily stepped into the vehicle. I felt horrible, but I still remembered the bright colors the day had started with. Now everything was black and white; everything was drained of color. The grey house and black grass made the world feel hopeless to me. A ray from the moon illuminated the interior of the car and I noticed my mother was holding another plant given to her by Penelope. It seemed that no matter how hardy a plant or flower was it always died when it came to my Mother. Maybe people are not so different from plants. I could see the full moon outside through the car window. I held on to that beacon of light to distract me from the darkness that I felt. The car ride ended all too soon. I remember hearing Penelope telling my mother that what we did was no big deal and to take it easy on us.

It was dark inside. There would be no light on this night. She grabbed my brother first. She grabbed him by the hair and struck him atop the head repeatedly. My father had

taught her well; she was hitting only areas that would hide the bruising. She threw him down, came to me, and then did the same.

My brother and I were beside each other on the floor breathing like frightened animals. I could see my terror reflected in the glint of my brother's eyes. I could see the rage and insanity in my mother's eyes and felt like I was crippled inside. Maybe she saw this because then she did something I had not seen before. She turned her anger inward and started beating on herself on her own chest and face. With an inhuman shriek, she pulled out clumps of her hair. My brother and I started crying even more begging her to stop "stop mom, please!"

Each moment was an eternity. I just wanted it to end but hell is eternal. I tried to look at her despite the daggers that were butchering my gut. She would not listen to reason. She continued the self-abuse by tearing her shirt off and then by scratching at her chest and neck leaving bloody marks where her nails scrapped and broke the skin. "This is what you have done to me!" she screamed. "This is because of you!" Her blood looked black in the darkness of our place. "Why, God do you do this to me? Why do you torture me, God?" she screamed, "I wish I was dead!" She grabbed us by our arms and dragged us to our bedroom.

The next thing I knew I was in my bed begging for oblivion. "Why? Why? Why?" I kept thinking, wondering the reason for the horrors experienced tonight.

I remembered that each time I made my mother cry an angel died and fell from heaven. So this was why things like this happened. It was because God hated me and made me into an unworthy and powerless person. It all made sense. This belief became my deepest, most shameful secret that I never spoke of to anyone. God hated me so much that not only did he make me flawed but also he brought pain to those who were close to me, to

further punish me. Then finally, a form of dreamless sleep came, the type brought about by severe trauma where the body and mind virtually shut down.

The next morning when I woke up, I noticed mother pretended as if nothing had happened. She went about her day as she normally did. She may not have changed, but I had. I did not notice at first but I was not glowing anymore and was holding less light. I did not notice at first that the world was drained of its colors, more and more each day. The boy who had begun experiencing life with a perspective of unlimited possibility, now was looking at the world through a box without a window.

Story 2: Development of Intermediate Beliefs

“The answer Mr. Giannoulis?” I looked up from my reverie with a start. “Mr. Giannoulis, the answer?” The teacher continued to probe with growing annoyance. I had no idea what the answer was. I had been lost in apprehension thinking about the walk home today after school. Dillon, a kid in my class, had it in for me. The word was that he was going to beat the crap out of me after school. Dillon was one of those individuals with personal qualities that won over others easily. Some people he won over through friendship, others through respect, and still others through fear. Even the girls flocked to him even though we were at an age where we typically presented disdain towards the opposite sex. In typical fashion of my crappy luck, it had to be Dillon that I accidentally pissed off. So now he had me in his crosshairs.

It was not getting beat up that I was afraid of; that was actually the easy part. I could easily take a few blows and put on a show of being hurt and the situation could probably end with that. What distressed me the most is that Dillon had the capacity to turn almost everybody against me. Few would side with me. Why would they? I was an overweight nine-year-old kid without any redeeming qualities whatsoever. Although it killed me inside to think about myself this way, this is all I had known of myself because almost everybody I had ever met, including my mother and father, had treated me as such.

“What is the answer Mr. Giannoulis?” I could feel my face flushing crimson and my heart pounding in my chest like a jackhammer. I knew that if I messed up this question the class would laugh at me again thus reinforcing the fact that I was a loser. My body involuntarily clenched as if the seat I was an electric chair and somebody was about to throw

the switch. I tensed even more as the charged attention of the entire class surged to me and then through me.

My head was swimming and I could feel a black vitreous ball in my throat. It was the emotional sludge that results from oppression and years of repressed self-expression and emotions. I could hear the buzzing of mocking laughter and the pain of jabbing comments. I could not understand what they were saying, but I could feel it. The disgrace I felt told me everything I needed to know.

"Get out to the hallway," the teacher sneered his contempt. "There you can think why it's important to pay attention in class!"

I would not have said anything at that point, even if I could have. I knew better than to do that. My home life had taught me the horrible consequences of talking back to an angry adult. I did not do these things on purpose, rather, I was preoccupied with trauma from both school and home. I suffered at school all day then went home, looking for a soft place to fall, but found myself instead between a rock and a hard place. I could not talk to anyone. Airing my family's dirty laundry in public was tantamount to treason in my family. I started to question my experiences thinking that I didn't deserve this kind of punishment. I was innocent. Why did these things happen to me? Why couldn't anybody see me? I needed help and to be loved, not punishment. I could see this and I was just a kid; why couldn't anybody else see this?

I pushed my desk forward, and stood up to begin the walk of shame. I was keenly aware of how I looked as all eyes were on me. It was impossible to fade into the background as I usually tried to do. I focused my gaze down at the ground, wanting the earth to open up and swallow me whole. My hair had fallen over my face making it difficult to see. My dark

brown hair was unusually thick and full, and a nightmare to manage. Messy, unkempt, and desperately in need of a cut, my hair sat atop a head that was too big for my body making my head look even bigger than it actually was. Although my clothes were clean, they were unattractive and ill fitting. They were the type of clothes that invite the scorn of the older kids out on the playground after school. As I walked, I prayed to die in spades, but in my mind I was forsaken, and as such, beyond that mercy.

I was walking down the row with my head down holding in what was a volcano of grief wanting to explode. However, it did not explode because I knew that even though I was in a building with hundreds of other people, there was no one there to hear my scream. There was nobody there to see or hear me. My so-called friends were laughing too and I stifled the groan as knives were stuck a little further into my back. My heart blackened even more as the group of girls I had to pass to get to the door leaned back in their desks with contempt and disgust on their faces. My parents were right, nobody will ever love me, but I knew I'm not like that; not really. Why couldn't anybody see me? As I continued my death march, I felt empty inside; yet, with a terrible pain as those around me took what can't be given.

Dillon sat behind the group of girls. "You're dead, worm" he hissed softly as I walked by. The teacher regained control of the class as I walked out the door into the cold hallway. It was darker outside in the hall compared to the well lit classroom, and I was comforted, even though the darkness reminded me of something inside me; something not pleasant that wants to come out. I curled up with my back against the cold wall and made myself as small as possible. With my head tucked in and on my knees in a sitting fetal position I prayed to God. Again, I prayed to die in spades, yet I knew my prayer was useless.

Accepting the futility of praying, I started to question why. Why did God give me nothing? It seemed as if the world had thrown me away; as if I was not worth anything and as if I did not deserve anything good. I took inventory in my mind of some of the other kids I knew to see if I was truly as destitute as I felt I was. Gabriel came to mind. His family was as poor as my own, also on welfare, but he had a great personality and had no trouble making friends. Michael was not attractive, and neither did he have the greatest personality, but at least his parents loved him and they had money. He was respected because he always had the coolest new gadgets and expensive clothing. Raphael had parents who seemed like they did not much care about him but he was attractive. He was a person that the girls seemed to love to be around. No matter whom I thought about, nobody was as destitute as I was. Why was I left out? It seemed that God had provided for everybody in some way, by giving them something that made life worth living. Why was I cursed with this horrible fate?

In that cold and dark school hallway I had an epiphany about why I was always so afraid, and that made me feel better. I realized why the other kids had all sorts of courage that I did not have. They had the courage of a full stomach. They had the courage that comes from knowing you are loved and have someone who has your back. They had the courage that comes from knowing that their parents have the resources to deal with any circumstance that can arise. Even though I was still just a child, I realized that my fears were a consequence of my existential poverty.

Movement caught from the corner of my eye interrupted my downward spiral. I saw someone turn the corner and enter the hallway. It was Jay, a true friend and somebody I could count on. Unfortunately, he was weak as a kitten and not very socially influential. Jay was a smart kid who loved sports but was the exact opposite of me in many ways. He was

undersized for his age and always slightly immature, whereas I was bigger than average and more grown up compared to other kids my age. I was dark haired with brown eyes and olive skin, whereas he was blonde with pale eyes and pale skin; almost an albino.

“Is it true about Dillon wanting to fight you?” he asked excitedly.

“Not just fight,” I replied, “He wants to kick my ass in.”

“So what? You can take him!” he replied confidently.

He was probably right. It was well known out on the playground that I was a tough kid; I had to be or I had nothing. When we played games of strength like wrestling, I always dominated. When wrestling, it was not unusual for me to be pitted against several other kids in order to even things up. I probably could easily beat him in a fight but the issue was my gentle and loving nature. I did not have the heart to physically hurt someone, it wasn't the kind of person I wanted to be. I knew what pain was, and I knew it on many levels and that the world was full of it, so I wanted nothing to do with it. There was also the issue of the school and the issue of my parents finding out. If my parents found out, without a doubt, there would be hell to pay.

As Jay and I continued our conversation, I wondered when I would be let back into the classroom. I could hear that the class was watching a National Geographic filmstrip on animals. “What happened? Why does he want to fight you anyway?” Jay inquired.

“It's all so stupid; it was an accident...” I recounted, in an embarrassed and frustrated tone, the events that put me in my current position.

There were five of us in an unsupervised classroom during lunch. The teacher had requested that we stay indoors to catch up on homework that had not been finished. Of the five of us in the classroom, there were four boys and one girl. The girl's name was Trinity,

and I was in love with her. She was considered the prettiest girl in the class. She had shoulder length dark hair, big brown eyes, and was one of those girls who is short in stature and develops early. Of course, I would never have admitted my feelings for Trinity to a living soul, not even to Jay. That did not matter though because I was still pretending not to like girls, much like many of the other boys my age. I felt comfortable behind that facade.

As fate would have it, Dillon was one of the boys in the class and he was not in a good mood having had to stay in and work during lunch. Shortly after the teacher had left, Dillon started to play the heavy. No doubt, he was bullying us to show off for Trinity. He started first by calling us down and being cynical. He escalated his bullying by getting out of his chair and smacking the guys behind their head as they did their work. He did not smack me in the head, though, he only punched me in the shoulder. I could tell that he was a little bit intimidated by me but he had nothing to fear. After a while Trinity scolded him; she was the only one brave enough to stand up to him. After a while, Dillon apparently got bored with bullying and he decided to try something new.

“Get up you bunch of dorks! The teachers’ not in here; why are we working?” he asked contemptuously.

We all got up and started to socialize. We stood in a circle around one desk that nobody was sitting at. Dillon, pleased that we were all obeying, toned down the aggressiveness and started being more social. I was not very comfortable in this situation. I tried my best to appear at ease and not intimidated. I did not know who was scaring me more, Dillon or Trinity. Of course, I was terrified of these two for very different reasons. I hated that about myself. Why was it that I was so socially awkward? I hated the fact that I could not just relax and join in a conversation. Situations such as this were often like a

nightmare from which I could not wake up, where I was powerless to do anything. I had to try to ignore my embarrassment and shame at how I looked and how I was dressed, especially when girls were around. I had to pretend to laugh, and pretend to have a good time to fit in, but inside I was tormented. The worst of times were when I made an effort to contribute to the conversation, for example, by trying to say something funny. The attempt usually fell flat; then I would be left there floundering like a fish out of water. After a few minutes, Dillon was back to his usual form. He had started punching and pushing the other boys. We endured the punishment with minimal complaint. It was getting pretty rough in there and I was concerned that he was going to hurt someone. After hitting one of the other boys particularly hard, Trinity again scolded him for being so ignorant. Dillon then proceeded to walk towards Trinity with his fist raised.

That was where my troubles begin. On some level I must have thought he was going to hurt her. Without a thought, purely instinctual reflex took over my body's faculties. I felt my body move and step in front of Trinity and then shove Dillon out of the way. It was one of those moments where everything was going in slow motion. To my surprise, he actually flew through the air, knocking a desk and chair over and causing a domino effect with three more desks and chairs. Time returned to normal speed and I was horrified and petrified at what I had done.

My face turned red and I quickly ran over to Dillon to try to give him a hand up. As I approached him, I could see that he has misunderstood the crimson on my face for anger, and I could see the look of fear and confusion on his face. I quickly pulled him up and asked him if he was okay. Before he could answer, I started righting the desks and putting the chairs back up to cover my own shame and fear. To my surprise, he started to do the same. Why

did I do such a stupid thing? Now everyone would know how I felt about her I thought. What a joke. The guy who had nothing is interested in the girl who had everything--the ultimate in terms of mission impossible. I muttered something about having to right the place before the teacher came back. I grumbled that I was sorry and that I thought he was ready for the push because I thought he was attacking me. He said that he was going for Trinity. I felt cautiously optimistic relief because they all seemed to have bought my story. My secret was safe, but now I had to deal with the consequences of Dillon and his bruised ego. I finished telling Jay the story, withholding all information regarding my secret.

Jay offered me his help and I was grateful to have him as my friend. We made plans to hide in the back of the school for a while and then take a different way home in order to avoid Dillon and his crew.

“Do you want to play hockey later on?” Jay asked.

Just then, serendipitously, I heard the filmstrip the class was watching. The narrator was commenting on the shocking grotesqueness of how some mothers within the animal kingdom will eat their young. It struck a chord in me. At least the animals only have to go through it once, I thought. “Yea,” I responded, “hockey sounds good”. I did not like hockey but at least it got me out and away from my home, away from the mother who ate her children on a daily basis.

I met Jay at the end of the school day as we had planned. Apparently, missing the filmstrip had been punishment enough, and the teacher cut me loose after a brief pep talk. I’m not sure if the pep talk had its intended effect because I was once again left feeling that I was not good enough, that I didn’t measure up, and that I was hopeless, even though I was doing my best.

Jay and I cut through a nearby park figuring that killing time at a local mall was a good way to avoid Dillon and his crew. Although Jay was animated and appeared to be having fun I was suffering inside but as usual I was trying to appear stoic and brave. Why did these things always happen to me? We were walking around the mall and I was lost in a hopeless haze. Everywhere I looked everything was telling me that I was not good enough. Everything was telling me that I had been thrown away. Some advertisements told me that I needed their product to be cool, but for me that was impossible as I could not afford that. Other advertisements told me that I needed their product to be happy. Again, that was impossible also because I could not afford that either.

Making things even worse was that as we walked in and out of the stores, I noticed the look of distrust and disgust as I walked into a store. I had never stolen anything, yet they treated me as if I was a criminal. All around me, I saw what society thought of me. All around me, I saw what I supposedly needed but could not have. The longer we stayed in that mall the deeper the hole I was in became.

I was startled out of contemplating my nightmare when I suddenly tripped and stumbled. I looked down and saw my lace had come undone and felt that as if it was the end of the world. It was the straw that broke the camel's back; I'd had enough and could endure the mall no longer. When we departed from the mall we were left with an important decision. We could either cut through the park again, the longer way to get home, or take the quicker way by the boulevard. We decided on the park because there was less chance that Dillon and his crew were waiting there. We cut into the park, quickly covering ground to get our butts out of the area.

As my luck would have it, Dillon and his crew were at the park and walked into the clearing just as we did. There was no escape at this point; the ridicule that would come from running away would be much more costly than taking a beating. Luckily, there were only a few of them. We waited for them to cover the ground over to us. Dillon came straight to me calling me down and uttering threats. As this happened, Jay skulked off to the side so as not to become a target; I was alone again. Dillon smacked me across the head. Oddly, I was not afraid. Although I could not hear what was being said, I could hear his friends laughing and calling me down. He wound up and punched me in the mouth. What happened next was unexpected. I decided that I had to hate myself enough to allow myself to become the monster I had to be in order to survive. The darkness inside me had come to life. The door to the vault was thrown from its hinges as the darkness made its entrance into my world. Years of grief, victimization, and hopelessness were transmuted instantaneously into uncaring and unrelenting rage.

I picked Dillon up over my head in a body slam maneuver and threw him onto the ground. Again, I saw that same look of fear in his eyes that I had seen previously. He attempted to attack with some punches but I subdued him. I grabbed him by the hair, as he scampered and turned his back. "I'm going to kill you," I howled. Of course, I did not kill him; rather it was me that I killed that afternoon.

I learned much on that day. I realized that I had to hate myself to overcome my gentle docile nature. I learned that being hated and feared was better than being ridiculed. It hurt less and it made a bitter and painful life a little more bearable. It was the day that I became what I had always dreaded to become. It was the day that society finally turned me into a consumer, as opposed to the consumed. It was the day I went from being the prey to being

the predator. I had come to realize that contrary to societal and religious mores, it was not love and charity that ruled the day but rather power, and for me, on that day, I realized that power was there to be taken. It was the day I learned that my darkness would have my back even if nobody else would. Still, the wounded part of me, now buried deep inside, wondered about me. How was it, that when the world consumed a child, nobody considered it rape?

Story 3: Depression

I awoke to the sounds of someone rummaging in the kitchen. The more I regained my orientation to self, time, and place, the less I liked what I was experiencing. Mornings were never good even at the best of times. It was as if the grime of my unconscious floated to the top, making me feel horrible, and it took about an hour and copious amounts of coffee to push it all back down into oblivion. This morning was worse than usual because my head felt as if it had been inflated, about ten sizes too big, before being shrunk back down to regular size. As for the rest of my body, it was protesting the bombardment of sensations that were akin to severe flu like symptoms. The physical and emotional pain was overwhelming and made me lay still and not move.

“Maybe I’m just dreaming,” I thought hopefully.

I could hear the rummaging again and it was preventing me from falling back into the merciful arms of oblivion, instead keeping me in a state between sleeping and wakefulness. I felt the familiar sensations of riding the wake of a multi-chemical hangover. Suddenly, unbidden vivid images start to flood into my awareness. In this state of semi-consciousness, I could not tell if the images are real memories or just memories of a dream. I steeled myself for what might come and allowed the images to flood my mind.

It was the start of the night and we were in Damon’s basement. It was nice and cool in the basement and it was nice and dark. Three black candles were the only source of light and they scarcely lit the perimeter of the large room. The flames from the candles struggled to illuminate the thick burgundy curtains that elegantly covered the white walls that were underneath. Remnants of past repasts were strewn on the floor, as were various empty containers from previously consumed beverages, most of them alcoholic. The room was

divided haphazardly into three sections. The one section was a workout area equipped with various exercise and weightlifting apparatus, including a stationary bike, bench press, and weights. Beyond that was an area with chairs, a couch, and television, similar to a typical living room, other than the unusual ornaments that decorated the walls. I was sitting on the inclined bench-press and looking at the third section. There a large inverted pentagram was draped high on the wall and hung over an inverted cross that sat on an altar with various other arcane apparatus.

There were just three of us that night. Adam, with his buttocks exposed was bent over on the altar, bracing his weight, as Damon injected him with a dose of steroids. Damon looked at me with a sly grin. He looked like the cat that ate the canary. "O.K. I'm done" he says to Adam "I've pulled out the syringe".

"That wasn't so bad", said Adam, as he stood up straight and began to pull his pants up. He was visibly shocked and stopped short of pulling up his pants when he realized that Damon had left the syringe in all the way to the hilt. We had a laugh at Adam's expense as he stood there helpless with his pants down unable to turn to see or reach the syringe because of his bulk. The thick oil based steroid and intramuscular nature of these injections require the use of long and thick needles. I walked over and pulled the pipe out of his butt cheek.

We had just finished working out, and had just cracked some beers to prime ourselves for the evening. I gulped down half a beer, grabbed a fresh syringe, and loaded it up with the oil-based testosterone. This day was a biceps day, one injection in each bicep. I did not know if there was any validity to the colloquial claims of enhanced benefits through using site injections. It did not matter anyway, because the physical pain was better than feeling the nothingness I usually felt. The cuts on my arms spoke volumes on that. Little did I know,

however, that I would pay dearly, later on in life, for those injections. I am not sure I would have cared, even if I did know, because the life I was living was a deliberate slow form of suicide. Rebellion and subversion were now my only thrill. I was hateful and critical of people in general and all social institutions. I did not realize this but I was so far removed from my authentic compassionate and loving nature that it was impossible to be happy. I believed that who I was that day was me, because I had forgotten why I became this way. I had forgotten that I adopted this way of living to survive and as a way to escape the pain of my life.

I was seventeen, but I looked more as if I was in my twenties. At five foot ten inches and over two hundred pounds of steroid enhanced human, I was a sight to behold. I had chest length black hair, always all black wardrobes, and steel toed boots that provided a height advantage. I used my wardrobe, indeed my body, to communicate to others to stay away from me. The black clothing also had additional personal significance and reflected the idealism of adolescence. My black wardrobe expressed my mourning. I mourned how humanity was filled with so much hate and ignorance. I mourned the hungry and the homeless. I mourned how few could see through the political and religious hegemony and how they were content to live as sheep to the slaughter. Worst of all, I mourned how God had desecrated humanity by turning his back on us. I mourned how society continued to burn me, and others like me. I mourned how the masses blindly followed false ideals and ideologies. I mourned how hegemony and hypocrisy ruled the day and made my life a living hell. For that, there was no forgiveness. Society's harms were unforgivable. No wise and loving God did this, I thought, and one day God would fall too.

Damon interrupted my reverie and drew my attention with his movements. He was the most impressive physical specimen out of our small group. He was eighteen years old, well over six feet tall, and about two-hundred and fifty pounds and was the informal leader of our group. Damon was a charismatic paradox in that he was the ultimate expression of the “evil genius” but unlike most evil geniuses, he had the body and strength of a professional wrestler. Born with the blondish brown hair typical of his heritage, he dyed it black to match the antisocial image he wanted to convey. He was thrilled to be watching as I successfully injected my left bicep. Adam on the other hand was not so enthusiastic and went to see what was on the television. Again, I grabbed a fresh syringe and loaded it up with oil. This maneuver was more difficult because I had to use my left hand to hold the syringe, and I am right handed. I felt the pinch as the needle broke the skin and the needle slid in much easier after that. As I slowly injected the oil, Damon was watching fascinated and with glee. “F***** ‘A’, Andyman,” he encouraged. “We’re going to get fu***** huge and were going to f*** everyone up!” he exclaimed in a tone filled with pride and excitement.

I finished the injection and just as I pulled out the syringe, several ounces of blood spurted out in a millisecond, and quickly covered the side of my chest and floor. I was amazed at how much blood could surge out of such a tiny hole. “F*****!” I cursed as I put pressure on the vein with my fingers. Damon was delighted and overjoyed with laughter, but the laughter did not bother me; I knew he was not mocking. I exited the room to the adjoining bathroom where I cleaned myself up. I knew I did not have to worry about the blood on the floor.

Several minutes passed and as I re-entered the room I saw Damon had just finishing loading his shotgun. He chugged his beer and threw the can to the floor to join the other

empties. He then raised the gun and took aim at Adam. He was teasing Adam and reveling in Adam's uncomfortable squirming. We knew he would not pull the trigger on a brother, but still, accidents happen. He turned the gun in my direction, as I walked back into the room. "Andyman," he said, with his voice quivering in mad fashion, as he laughed. He really was a mad man, but I respected him on many levels, because he had introduced me to alternative conceptions of God, and the value of questioning and examining the status quo.

"F*** off, I replied in a stern tone, "put the fu***n gun down."

He was still laughing as he stood down and I think I detected a hint of embarrassment. "I'm just kidding you guys," he said apologetically as he wiped perspiration off his forehead and upper lip. Years later, I would wonder if that gun he pointed at us was the same gun he used to take his own life.

"What are we going to do tonight?" Adam asked.

"Whatever," I reply, "Let's get fu**ed up." It had been a stressful week and the only way I knew how to cope was to let off steam in chemical fashion.

"Yea!" Damon chimed, "Lets get some coke."

I did not want to do coke. I wanted to be able to sleep later on that night because I only had a few hours of sleep in the last few nights. Besides, our group strongly believed in discipline and control, and believed that those who are addicted to drugs were addicted because they were weak and inferior. We took measures so that we did not use drugs everyday. Nevertheless, the more time that passed the less steadfast Damon seemed to be about this philosophy.

After a brief discussion, we compromised and decided to really cut loose and do both magic mushrooms and coke. Adam was sent to the liquor store to get more alcohol, while

Damon and I gathered everything else. The plan was to meet as soon as possible at Miller's, Damon's brother's house. There we could do what we wanted as long as we shared some of our loot.

We arrived at Miller's to find that Adam was already there. After the initial greetings, I grabbed a beer and sat down to watch some TV. The house was buzzing with activity as everyone prepared the house for the night's festivities. People were shutting all the blinds and drapes, organizing the beers, liquor and mix in the fridge and freezer, finding and cleaning a small mirror, and clearing off the dinning room table. I decided to take a minute to collect my thoughts. I started flipping through the channels with the remote as I drank a beer. An attractive adolescent female who looked about my age caught my eye, and I tuned in. I turned up the volume and understood that she was trying to convey her unconditional love to her boyfriend. For a span of seconds, I felt anxious and nauseous; automatically, in defense, my darkness won over and my discomfort was overridden by anger and derision. Unconditional love? Bull****. I angrily pushed the power button on the remote. There would be no need for that tonight.

If anybody would have asked me about my reaction to the scene I would have rationalized that I was disgusted because love was not real, that it was an illusion, especially unconditional love. Love for me, was a biochemically induced state not so different from being high on drugs. Besides, from my perspective, within our society, all the love that I had seen and experienced was selfish and always contractual; never unconditional.

I got up and looked around and I was pleased to be at Miller's place. I was in the mood to be social and the guys I was with were good people in my eyes. They were genuine,

free of pretense, and lived an anti-social lifestyle and I respected that. It was a far cry from being in a mall, for example, where there was the constant sense that I would never fit in.

We all sat around the wooden table in the dining room. There we spent several hours snorting coke, smoking pot, and drinking beer. We all took turns passing the mirror around. We were all talking quickly and there was an air of euphoria. We did not do anything remarkable but just "trip" in an altered state of awareness where even simple things can be fascinating. For example, I was put in charge of refining the coke from rock into powder form. I took a fifty-dollar bill and crushed the coke chunks underneath with a credit card. I then chopped the remaining pebbles into a fine powder using a razor blade. We were fascinated by how fast my hand was performing the chopping motion. We were pedantically arguing two different hypotheses. We were not sure if what we were seeing was a perceptual illusion from the drugs, or, if the speed with which I chopped was merely physical enhancement from the cocaine stimulant.

Suddenly I was feeling really high and I remembered that Damon, Adam, and I had ingested several grams of magic mushrooms about an hour earlier. I began to laugh excessively and Damon knew what was going on. It was time for the three of us to go for a walk. All three of us had started peaking on the psychedelic mushrooms. The fresh cool air of the spring night was invigorating and we felt invincible. We spent hours wandering the streets hallucinating and frolicking as if we were children. We found ourselves in a park and spend a considerable amount of time playing on the equipment. We were drinking beers that we brought for refreshment.

It was soon after we tired of the playground equipment that we faced the challenge of the "insurmountable mountain". It was a cliff of sorts, very steep at around seventy-degree

incline. We spent what seemed like several hours on that mountain just trying to climb it. It was one of the biggest challenges, yet funniest at the same time, that we would face. For instance, I would be resting about half way up, when Damon would ask for a hand up. I would try and pull the gargantuan up but what resulted was both of us tumbling to the bottom. With the three of us helping each other, it took a long time for us to scale the beast. Once at the top we had an impromptu celebration for succeeding at such a difficult task. It would be several weeks before we discovered that the “insurmountable mountain” was a small hill about fifteen feet tall.

We left the park, with no particular destination in mind, flying high from the success of our mission impossible. Adam brought our trudging to a halt, “Hey, guys look at this,” he said in a concerned tone. He was looking at his reflection on the glass wall of a bus shelter. The street lamp above was powerful enough to turn the glass into a good reflector. The three of us stepped up beside each other to share in the investigation.

“Are you seeing what I see?” I asked.

“What are you seeing?” asked Damon in an excited tone.

“We’re all dead” I replied in awe, “We’re all zombies!”

Damon laughed his usual insane cackle and moved in closer for a better look.

We were all somehow sharing in the same macabre vision of that reflection and loving it.

We all looked like we were corpses. Our faces were decayed, pale grey with black areas, hollow sunken in eyes. It looked as if somebody had painted our faces like Halloween

masks. That night we took it as a sign of our power, our acceptance by the dark forces; now I see it as a reflection of what was hidden on the inside without love or light.

As we were walking down the street the feeling of superiority and invincibility was overwhelming. Damon decided he was no longer going to walk around the parked cars on the street. The 250-pound steroid monster walked over the cars stepping on the bumper first then on the hood stomping massive dents and shattering windshields from front to back with his hard-soled boots. Adam and I were laughing so hard and were so intoxicated that we could barely walk. I started to tire out and took turns leaning on Damon and Adam for support. We were not in a hurry to get anywhere but I was genuinely surprised not to hear the sound of sirens as we continued our out of control spree.

At one point in the odyssey, we found ourselves in the outskirts of a rural neighborhood. It was approximately three in the morning yet I had no real sense of time in the altered state of consciousness I had induced. It was as if I had lived forever, yet at the same time, I found myself in this corporeal experience where time flew by. Nothing seemed real. As we continued our travels, we accidentally found ourselves outside a small church.

"Let's go inside!" Damon offered in a sinister tone.

"I'm burning out," I voiced my protest.

"Just for a little while." Damon insisted

Adam agreed with Damon. Adam tried to get in through the doors but they were all locked. Adam then tried to kick the side door open several times but to no avail. The massive Damon stepped up and with one potent kick smashed the door off its frame. There was no alarm and nobody inside so we decided to explore.

I was in the moment of decay. It was the chemical come down that caused the surfacing of repressed emotions and memories that haunted me. I had no chemical or psychic energy left to repress my emotional pain. I was also feeling nauseous as if I had had

too many beers. I stumbled into the dark structure and saw the pews on the left and the altar on the right. I quickly headed for the pews and lay down. I was starting to feel really sick. Damon and Adam had excitedly gone up to the altar and I could hear them snooping around up there. I closed my eyes for a few moments and when I looked up I saw Damon wearing vestments. I could not help but laugh, especially with the insane look on his face. Adam had found several bottles of wine and was drinking from a bottle. Damon by memory alone began the invocation of Satan as he tore the pages out of a bible, "In the name of Satan the ruler of the earth, the king of the world, I command the forces of darkness to bestow their infernal powers upon me. Open wide the gates of hell and come forth from the abyss to greet me as your brother and friend...."

I could have stopped it all. However, I decided not to. There was a god who made children starve, the god who gave blight, suffering, and hardship to innocent people. No, I would not stop the desecration. I had done my best to be a good Christian in the past and suffered for it while the ignorant and sinners were rewarded and were granted a good life. That for me was unforgivable. I lay back down on the pew and focused on the hatred burning in my chest as a welcome alternative to the nausea. Suddenly, I could hear Damon and Adam laughing.

"Andyman, Look! Look!" Damon called excitedly. I could not resist the sheer joy in his voice. I lifted my weary body and saw both of them walking in a circle urinating on the altar. I began to laugh-- sardonic, bitter and cutting. It was more representative of hatred and anger than humor. I then decided to do something I have not done for many years. Earlier in my life I had vowed that I would never cry or pray ever again. This time, however, I allowed myself an exception. I told god what I thought of him. I also made a promise that

one day his reign would end, if not by my hand, then by someone like myself. I did not know back then that this promise would soon to be realized. I lay back down and surrendered to the demons that I had no more power to repress. They were drawing me in, magnetically pulling me to the edge of the cliff that fell down to the pit of my unconscious.

Just as I started to fall into the chasm, I had a sleep startle and opened my eyes. I could hear the rummaging in the kitchen again. My head was still throbbing and my body still ached. As I drifted off back to sleep, I had not figured out if what I just remembered was real or just a dream.

Story 4: Cognitive Therapy

The cheerful banter of the CBC radio roused me from my deep slumber many hours before I had to get up for work. I could tell that it was a beautiful summer morning. It was so bright in my room that the white walls and thin white curtains of my room seemed to shimmer with inner luminosity. My heart sang with gratefulness for the bright light because it chased the remnant shadows of my past that had managed to sneak out and surface while I was sleeping. I effortlessly rolled out of my bed and quickly got dressed and headed to the kitchen for my morning dose of caffeine. I felt good and I was eager to get started on my early morning meditation, which began with a walk.

As I walked down the stairs of the hallway in my apartment, I contemplated the objectives of this walk. The first objective was transcendental while the other more mundane. The mundane component of the walk was that I was utilizing it as a fat burning exercise. I was proud to work as a personal trainer and manager for a gym, which was owned by a family of bikers. The transcendental reason was to take stock of my life and think about where I had come from, how far I had come, and where I wanted to go. My intention was to perform a dynamic style meditation, something I had been practicing for many years now, in order to contemplate my life.

My eyes stung, making me have to squint as I stepped out into the bright sunshine. With my first step outside, I consciously took in a huge breath savoring the exquisiteness of the fresh and cool morning air. I purposefully took several more breaths and savored each one until my body desensitized to the fleeting experience. For me there was nothing better than the first breath taken outside in the early morning. I felt happy and I felt satisfied.

"I have come a long way," I thought, as I turned on my mp3 player and began the journey. Within minutes, supported by the perfumed air and lush green surroundings, I was in a trance. I barely noticed the occasional vehicle that passed me by on the residential streets as I followed the twists and turns that would take me to the river. I did take the time, however, to admire the beautiful gardens and floral arrays presented by the different homes. At the appropriate point I walked in behind some houses and began the descent down a rugged and steep cut bank in order to get down to the river trails. I could feel my awareness changing as I got closer to the rivers body, getting more clearer, focused, and calm. Again, I consciously took some time to savor the fleeting initial experience of the lush riverside air.

Having arrived at my destination, I began my life analysis at mid-elementary school because anything earlier than that was still no-man's land for me. A lump forms in my throat as I begin to think about how my parents and peers rejected me, how I was bullied, and how I had lived a life of existential poverty-- poverty that went beyond just the material realm. Through hard work and an exceptional capacity to endure pain and suffering, however, I had been able to change my stars. I was physically strong and I was able to get respect through that, but for me it was empty and fruitless, because I knew it was respect based on fear. Eventually, I had become so anti-social that I forgot that being that way was a means to an end, for survival, and not an end in itself. I shook my head in wonder as I contemplated whether it was by luck, or circumstance or both, that I had begun exploring the wisdom traditions of the world. The wisdom traditions that advocated that individuals discover God for themselves through exploring and challenging what we take for reality were particularly appealing for me. Consequently, for the last eight years I had been meditating, literally every day, as well as voraciously reading texts and practicing techniques from the

various traditions. Through my study of the wisdom traditions, I was able to get a more balanced understanding of my life and myself; however, this had little impact on my continuing bouts of depression. What also helped me was that I started reading university textbooks on psychology and sociology, particularly psychology, as it is traditionally speaking “the study of the soul”. In particular, I found that cognitive psychology melded seamlessly with my spiritual practices, indeed, augmenting the process of spiritual development. For instance, the spiritual practice of mindfulness blends well with cognitive therapy. Most importantly, however, cognitive therapy had allowed me to overcome depressional reality constructions for the past few years. I knew I had a long way to go before I could say that I had fully transcended the traumas of my past. Nevertheless, I was able to gain new understanding of who I was and to realize that my childhood and adolescent experiences were not my fault. I realized that I was not a flawed human being and that that horrible idea stemmed from very dysfunctional core beliefs relating to who I was.

Through the study of the wisdom traditions I had realized that the overt details of the traditions were different; however, the core structural features were the same. Culture puts a face on God and provides God’s details, I thought. The same can be said about an individual and his/her environment. If the person is not taught otherwise, the person, for better or worse, can allow the environment to define his/her personal value and characteristics.

I began to walk faster as my focus intensified. The greenbelt beside the river that I walked through is right beside the town; nevertheless, I savored the feeling that I was alone in the middle of nowhere. My attention turned to my current employment. I loved working as the manager and personal trainer of a gym. Although I had quit using steroids several years ago, through hard work, I had been able to maintain all my size and strength.

Furthermore, my years of experience and study of the science of bodybuilding had allowed me to gain enough knowledge that I had a solid reputation, even for training others to compete in competitions.

Working at the gym had been the ideal setting for me the last couple of years for all sorts of reasons ranging from, once again, the mundane to the transcendental. On the transcendental side, the gym had afforded me the privilege to meet two individuals, one a male and one a female, who became mentors for me. Both were elders, so not only did I learn much wisdom from them but I also received from these two individuals the healing effects of unconditional positive regard. On the mundane side, working at the gym afforded me a great social life. My shift started at two p.m. and ended at ten p.m., Monday through Friday, so this allowed me to socialize till three or four a.m. every night, and still allowed me to get enough sleep to function at work. Although I had mellowed in my resentment of society and people in general, my inner circle of friends and I preferred to get away as much as possible, and consequently, we partied in the bush doing as we pleased in the solitude. Nevertheless, I also had a committed social life in the downtown bar scene during the weekends.

I shuddered as I remembered how I used to “party”. The heavy use of hard drugs and alcohol were merely an escape from the pain. I sneered sarcastically as I corrected my own thinking. The drug use was not an escape from my pain but just an alteration of it. The drugs provided a lull from the pain of everyday reality but gave me a different kind of pain in exchange. The altered state of the pain was a welcome break at that time. If I were lucky, there would be a blackout or blurring of the pain so there was a lull from it that way as well. Again, I shuddered as I remember how lost I was inside myself. At this

point I had stopped using hard drugs and rarely drank alcohol. I marveled in wonder at my remarkable ability to stop using drugs cold turkey. I did still like to smoke small amounts of marijuana when I got off work and went out. My limit was two or three puffs of a joint in a night, which was nothing compared to what I used to smoke. I was very glad to be out of that phase of my life. You could not pay me all the money in the world to relive that experience, I thought to myself. I was grateful for the new friends that I gained who led a more balanced lifestyle than the individuals I used to hang out with.

I turned the corner and saw a young woman walking towards me on the same path and I reflexively squeezed my abdominals in a half-flexed condition. I was pleased with the serendipity of the moment; the sun is in front of me on the horizon, thus, accentuating the definition in my chest, thighs, and abdominals. I felt an involuntary surge of pleasure as she greeted me with a flirty gaze and smile. I smiled back with a friendly grin but kept on marching foreword not wanting to lose my contemplative momentum. "Wow!" I marveled, as I considered how my self-confidence and social life had changed so dramatically.

After walking for approximately forty minutes, I decided I would have a 'stillness style' meditation. I chose a shady spot that overlooked the river. I leaned back against a giant cottonwood tree and slowly closed my eyes appreciating the coolness of what was going to be a very warm day. I felt the stillness of meditation settle over my mind and body. I could feel my "Self" which is defined as "pure consciousness", pulling away from my "mind" defined as the contents of consciousness. This experience is like watching clouds float past in the sky, except it is my consciousness watching the contents of my mind. I could see my mind having its normal thoughts, but the thoughts seemed distant, floating by because my consciousness is not identified as the thoughts. I loved the experience of

meditation. Within minutes, I could feel my body's endorphins and as they released I sank deeper into peacefulness and pleasure.

Suddenly, I saw an image develop in the back and center of my forehead, subjectively feeling distant from the contents of the mind. My heart jumped slightly in response to the unusual experience, but years of meditation had made me skilled and disciplined, and my physiology resumed its relaxed rhythm. The image was of a different quality than my thoughts yet I could not describe how it was different than a regular thought other than it was more abstract and carried much more information. I consciously connected to the image and I felt my heart opening which was an experience that was still rare for me. The image was a bright circle of white light in the centre, with lines and dots and geometric shapes all around. I basked in the feeling of love as the feeling overflowed beyond my opened heart and all around my body. I started to 'download' information from the image and I understood that the image was about unity and how all things that exist are one from one source. More specifically, in the trance I could understand that the circle represented Source, or God, and the other symbols like dots and lines and triangles and squares represented all other things that exist. No matter what the shape, color, or size of the phenomenon, all come from source and that means that all things in existence are divine. All things are limitless potential, in other words, God, under the influence of limitation. Thereby through the nature of finiteness, we are God formed into specific manifestations, all valuable and all worthy. I refocused on the feelings of love and felt a great sense of joy. I stayed there at the riverside in that meditation for as long as I could, hoping that through osmosis or some other miracle that I could embody this knowledge that I was experiencing. I had encountered this knowledge many times before in various versions through various texts. However, this was the first time

that I experienced it as I did. This was the first time that this knowledge had become experiential.

I delighted in the experience, so much so, that I lost track of everything else wishing to stay in that slice of heaven forever. Suddenly, without warning I saw another image that was dreadful compared to the first one and it was superimposed over the first image. In appearance, it was similar to a Rorschach inkblot and I could perceive that it was some type of black beast, dead and impaled on a black spike. There were many levels of information to the images and I intuited the next level of information: "IT IS DONE!". I was confused for the next few moments.

"What is done?" I thought. I heard myself gasp as the next level of meaning downloaded into my consciousness. It is done, I thought, as I began to remember a vow that I had made in the past. I had made a vow to God in a church that one night that He would fall and it would be the end of His reign of terror. Now I had just done that. I realized that I had destroyed that God because that God was an illusion; an illusion created in childhood and taken as real for a lifetime. I felt pain and grief in my chest as I realized all the pain and suffering I had experienced regarding God was also an illusion. I quickly let that go instead and focused on my newfound freedom that came from the new realization and experience of God. This new conception of God that I had taken literally years to build was completely different from my childhood conception. My new conception of God was that God is loving, merciful, and everything. This had to be the way it is because we are born of this God, the *oneness* that the wisdom traditions speak of. God does not forsake or damn any person because we are all a piece of God. I could feel tears puddle in my eyes as I let myself surrender to the moment. Those beautiful tears of joy washed away almost twenty years of

living in fear in that moment alone. The image of the impaled beast faded and the original image remained. I could now feel a deeper love and appreciation of that image. Sitting there under the cottonwood tree I was filled with so much gratitude and love that I wanted to get up and shout it from the rooftops. I knew better than to do that though and I contained myself until I could share it with someone close to me. "We are all okay," I beamed, "and we are all innocent."

Suddenly, I startled as I heard rapid movement and then felt a big cold nose sniffing at my ear and neck. I couldn't help but laugh and fall away from the offending breath that accompanied the cold nose. I opened my eyes to see a yellow lab running back to his owner who had not yet seen me from behind the tree. That was my sign to get up and resume my walk. I stood up, decided to warm up again, and began to stretch pleurably. It was as if I was experiencing my body for the first time, and for once, I liked what I felt. I resumed my walk and I was grateful that the temperature had risen significantly since the time that I first set out for my walk. I had not realized how chilly it was in the shade. I felt good, and I felt a peace that I do not remember ever feeling before.

Unfortunately, I was not able to incorporate or become the knowledge of that experience as I had hoped. Rather it was the start of an odyssey, a new one, where it would take years of life's vicissitudes for me, to come to grips with my new understandings. However, none of that mattered because in my heart, I knew that I had finally found a God that I could fall in love with, and She is magnificent.

Cognitive Restructuring

It was a typical Saturday afternoon when I first realized something was terribly wrong. My beautiful fiancé, also a student, was typing a research paper that was due in a couple of days. I felt that I was living a good life and had come a long way compared to my humble beginnings. I was working on my master's degree in order to become a certified counselor, a career that would allow me to feel that I was making a difference in the world or at least in some person's life. Overall, I had a sense that my life could not be any more perfect. I had finished the bulk of my homework and readings earlier in the morning so I had taken the liberty of having a bodybuilding workout in my home gym. Knowing the importance of hydration, I made sure to ingest plenty of liquids throughout the workout. Once I had finished the workout, as is human nature, I had to return the liquids back to their source. As I was urinating, I felt a sharp but dismissible pain in my left testicle. I was not concerned but I palpated reflexively. I was not certain but my testicle felt a little bit bigger. "Bah! It's nothing," I said to myself as I finished in the bathroom, "I'm probably just producing more testosterone".

Minutes later, I was walking between the kitchen and living room as I cooked my lunch. I conversed with my fiancé about random unimportant topics as I competed with the research paper for her attention. "I think I am producing more testosterone," I said to her.

"That's nice honey," she says absentmindedly as she focused on her work.

The humor of the situation was not lost on me and I chuckled as I turned to head into the kitchen. Without warning, I had a very unusual experience. I heard a deep and ominous voice from behind me, as if it was the voice of devil himself, coming from the opposite side

of where my fiancé was working. I heard only one horrible word from that ominous voice but it was enough to leave me chilled to the core: "CANCER!"

I stopped in mid stride both confused and alarmed. Was this a joke? I looked over my shoulder and there was nobody there. I looked over my other shoulder and my fiancé was still at the computer typing her paper. Apparently, I was the only one who heard it. Involuntarily, my body, knowing the potential consequence, declared its protest with a sinking feeling in my stomach and a rush of cold sweat. Suddenly, I was not so hungry anymore and I decide that the best way to cope with this situation is to get some balance through meditation. Meditation is my ground and my sanctuary and my positive addiction and first resort in crisis rather than drugs or alcohol as in the past.

I laid down in my bed and in moments, I was in a deep meditative state. It is a state where I can disconnect my consciousness from my mind, thereby, grounded in my being and faith rather than the vicissitudes of my mind's meanderings; I can have the ability to be objective about my situation. The process of that state is phenomenal. I can feel myself floating up or down, I cannot tell which, but it is if I am putting distance between one part of myself and another.

When the shift has been achieved, I can look at what is going through my mind. In this case, I could see my mind was racing in panic. There was fear of dying, the fear of what will happen to my fiancé, to my family, and my loyal dog. I was not afraid of what comes after death but rather of the process of dying. Cancer can be horribly painful. Would I waste away in front of my friends and family, turning from a virile young man into a husk of a human being? I would not let myself or others go through that. If it came to that I would find a way to quicken the process and die with my preferred form of dignity.

All this and more went through my mind and I had not even seen a doctor. In my meditative state, I can observe all these thoughts tracing through my mind in a slowed fashion and without the anxiety or emotion that would be associated to the particular thoughts. I was the objective observer the Yogis talk about and I was grateful for this skill more than I had ever been before. I looked inside myself to find my own answer before I let my mind get too far ahead of itself. I went into the place of stillness the yogis call the void. This is the place from which everything sprang from and the place to which everything will return. I looked for an answer and I waited for the silent knowing that would confirm or disconfirm my diagnosis. The answer came to me quickly, and there was no doubt about it; I had cancer.

In that state, I shored up my spiritual and cognitive skills and resources to put my mind at ease. From that meditative state, the mind has no choice but to listen, to acquiesce to the higher form of knowing. We are spiritual beings having a physical experience, not the other way around, I reminded myself. I have faced and overcome many challenges, I thought, and all of them, no matter how horrible, have been a gift in disguise; this situation is no different. I must do what the yogis would do and surrender to the river of life without judgment and without fear. “Besides, you haven’t had a diagnosis,” my mind chimed in, placated but coping with denial of what was already confirmed.

I was hungry again so I got up and out of bed to finish cooking my lunch. I began using my cognitive skills as I was making my lunch. I watched closely for automatic thoughts and cognitive distortions and made sure the thoughts I was having were rational and adaptive. It took some effort to reconcile my inner knowing diagnosis and the fact that many would see that as the “fortune teller” cognitive distortion. Getting up out of the meditation, I

noticed that the world looked different. In fact, it was qualitatively different on every level of experience. Colors looked brighter and I had a new appreciation for everything that was in my life. I looked at my fiancé and my heart melted as I realized how much I loved her and what a miracle she was. I went to her, hugged her, told her that I loved her, and did the same for my dog. I blessed and thanked the beautiful house that has been my sanctuary for the last five years. I could not make an appointment with my doctor until Monday so I made the commitment to enjoy the weekend as if it was my last, and I did.

I did not tell anything to my fiancé because I know she would be crushed. When Monday came around, I awaited for the opportune moment to make the call to book an appointment with my doctor.

“Hello, can I make an appointment with the doctor” I asked.

“What is this for?” she asks

“I have found a lump on my testicle.”

“Okay, but we are not taking any more bookings until Thursday,” she told me.

TICK TOCK TICK TOCK. Again, I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach followed by horrible cold sweat. For the first time I begin to comprehend the gravity of the issue of waitlists in the Canadian medical system. I never imagined that it was an issue that would touch my life but, “Thursday is fine,” I replied. Again, I shored up my spiritual and cognitive resources. I realized that now more than ever I must be the objective and rational observer. I examined the preconscious automatic thought that brought on the kick in the stomach and cold sweat. The automatic thought was simply that I would be terminal before I even saw a doctor. I went through the thought investigation process and instantly felt better.

My life did not miss a beat. I kept on working and kept going to graduate school. If anything, my quality of life had improved. It is true what they say that we do not truly appreciate what we have until we lose it or may be about to lose it. My mind kept telling me that I have not even had the diagnosis, but deep inside I know the truth, my inner knowing has never misguided me.

Thursday rolled around and I was waiting in the doctor's office. I was surprisingly calm and grateful that I even had the opportunity to see a doctor. I was keenly aware of the tragic fact that many people in this world do not have that luxury. The examination itself took seconds.

"I don't like what I am feeling," he says, "It is that hardness that concerns me."

"We will schedule you an ultra sound, to get a better understanding of what this is" he says.

"How long will that take?" I ask cautiously.

"About six weeks" he replied in that matter of fact tone with which doctors are so skilled with.

TICK TOCK TICK TOCK.

The doctor must have seen something in my reaction because he said "There are two routes we can take and we will put a bid in for both and take the quickest one." He has been my doctor for many years and he is the exemplar of a good physician. I was very grateful to have him in my corner. He has seen me and helped me from the time I was living a living death to now when my life is on track and I am on my way to being a counselor contributing to society rather than derogating it.

My life still did not skip a beat and I still had said nothing to anybody about my potential condition. Every week that went by, I was trying to live my life to the fullest. I had low moments; however, meditation or exercise or both quickly remedied those. At the end of the second week after seeing my doctor, I got the phone call to go get the ultra sound.

“Thank God,” I think to myself. “A two week wait is a far cry better than six weeks.”

The ultra sound was early in the morning in the hospital. Things seemed extraordinarily surreal yet very real at the same time. To me, the doctors and nurses in their white outfits looked like ghosts floating down the hallways, while the patients looked heavy and earthbound. Sitting there in the waiting room, I was more anxious than I had ever been about my situation to date.

I was called into a room, and asked to put on one of those famous hospital gowns; only worse yet I was supposed to put it on backwards! An attractive young female doctor was set to do the examination. Still there is no thrill in this situation. I was talking with her about my situation and asking questions and she denied everything.

“Oh, it might not be cancer” she said. “Even if it is we have an excellent urologist here in town.”

I could see through her feigned optimism. She was going to follow protocol and let the technicians analyze the ultra sound and then let my doctor tell me the news. I could tell she had seen this before; something in her communication gave it away. I could hear it loud and clear: “Boy, you’ve got cancer!”

I thanked the doctor and left the hospital. I was able to keep my composure until I got about three quarters of the way home. At that point, I pulled off into a greenbelt where I

could have some privacy and I started to cry. This was the first time that I had been able to cry since I made a vow not cry ever again in my childhood. I had tried to cry in the past before this point in time, but had never been able to do so. Now, I would be the objective observer but I would also honor my humanity; it was the least I could do for myself. Was this the first burgeoning of true self-love?

I arrived home and told my fiancé what had been occurring. Again, everything seemed surreal, as I had to tell the one I love that I might have cancer. I did not tell her that I knew definitively. I decided to let her down gently as possible. We both cried in each other's arms as I told her what was going on. She told me that no matter what happened she was there for me. I was wishing that I could tell her the same.

Days later, I got the phone call to go in and talk to my doctor. I was not surprised when he said "Not good, there is a tumor... it has formed a vessel and its own blood supply..."

I do not remember the rest. I remember being referred to the town urologist, the urologist the ultra sound doctor was talking about. My appointment was set for a week and a half from the day of confirming my diagnosis.

Over those ten days, again, my life did not miss a beat; however, I did have some unusual experiences. One night I decide to have some blueberries and cream. It is dessert but it is relatively good for you, so I was generous with the sugar I sprinkled on top. I had a big bowl and could not resist having another. Soon after I finished, however, I could feel activity in my tumor.

"You moron, I thought," as I remembered that tumors thrive on glucose. TICK TOCK TICK TOCK. For the next hour or so, I sat there in horror virtually feeling the tumor

growing inside me. Although normally I avoided focusing on that area, I did examine myself that night and found that the tumor was considerably bigger than the last time I had checked weeks ago.

One day after a meditation, I got up out of bed, sat down on my couch, and turned on the television. Immediately, I heard the words “welcome to the human network”. It was a cellular service commercial and I am not sure if it was the first time I noticed the commercial or if they had just started playing the commercial. The synchronicity was not lost on me. I was a man discovering my humanity through my crisis and through that finding my connection to all other people.

The most significant thing that happened to me was my change of heart and mind. All my life I have been a perfectionist willing to go to any extreme to achieve what I valued. It did not matter what I did to my body or future because I had minimal self-acceptance or self-love. Even though I had overcome much hardship and many obstacles in my life, a part of me still felt like, and still was that victimized child that was rejected by everybody. My fiancé had once commented that she wished that I could look at myself the way that I looked at her. We actually went to the mirror so I could see what she meant. The difference was remarkable. When I looked at her, my eyes are open, soft, and full of unconditional love and acceptance. When I looked at myself, my eyes became harder, colder, and steelier, as if I am looking at a stranger. Now however, I began to question all my previous judgments. Why did I judge myself so harshly? Why did I judge others so harshly? I am a perfect and innocent human being, just like all other people.

At one point during the week, I made the decision to go online to find out how this type of cancer was treated. I was horrified when I found out the best-case scenario was a

“radical orchidectomy.” That is “doctor speak” for complete removal of the testicle. I had visions going through my mind, strange as they were, of how the surgery might look. I had visions of those paper cutters that schools used to have when I was a kid, that have a large blade on pivot that you bring down with a chopping motion. OUCH! After such visions, I was relieved to find out that everything is removed from an incision in the lower abdomen.

The day that I saw my urologist was on a Friday. He told me the surgery was scheduled for the next Monday. TICK TOCK TICK TOCK. The clock was ticking fast for an entirely different reason now. I did not imagine things would move so quickly. I could not imagine living life with one testicle; then again, it really was no big deal. I had to keep things in perspective and hope that the cancer had not spread to any other part of my body. The doctor mentioned that they would find out for sure what type of cancer it was after the biopsy. There was a glimmer of hope. Were they just taking a tissue sample? No, my hopes were dashed as I was informed that the biopsy *is* the removal of the testicle. I could not help but cry.

The weekend flew by all too quickly. I savored and was grateful for every moment and was gentle with myself even when I made mistakes. I was really starting to understand what self-acceptance and self-love are. I had never imagined that I could respond to myself with such gentleness. The love and support that I received from my fiancé in those days was angelic. Maybe things would work out after all.

The day of the surgery came and went quickly. The surgery was in the morning and I was grateful not to have to wait all day. I went in and checked in and I was given a pill to help me relax. I don't remember much from there. The anesthesia and Demerol, thankfully, clouded my memory of the experience for the next couple of days. I do remember waking up

from the surgery and being sent home. Go figure, it was day surgery! The next morning I was scheduled for the MRI and blood work that would determine if the cancer had spread. I do not remember much of this experience. Again, thank God for Demerol.

The first few days, I made sure not to look or touch down there. I did not have the courage. But eventually I did and it was not so bad. The big obstacle in my life at that point was waiting for the MRI results and blood work to come back. I really did not want to have to go through chemotherapy. Nobody does, but I'm not sure I could survive it. I was also informed that if it spread to my chest I might require a dangerous surgery that temporarily removes the innards from the inside of the body cavity. I'm not sure I could deal with that. My fiancé and I spent a harrowing week waiting to get the results.

About a week after my surgery, I went into the urologist's office, the one who performed my surgery. He really is the wonderful and competent doctor that I was informed he was. I'm not saying that because he gave me a second chance at life. "Best news possible," he said. It was a wonderful gift; the cancer had not spread. I felt the weight of the world come off my shoulders. The specter of death was still close by however, as I would have to have an MRI and blood work every six weeks to monitor the return of cancer. For the next period of my life, I lived life six weeks at a time.

About two years have passed now and things are not so bad. I have married my fiancé and gotten used to being one brick short of a load. I even prance around for my new wife encouraging her to feast her eyes on "one-ball-lishness". Although it is an experience I never want to experience again, it has all been worth it. I love others and myself, as I never have before. For instance, I have stopped bodybuilding, something I have been doing since around nine years of age for reasons of feeling inadequate. I have never been so skinny and

non-muscular, yet I have never accepted my body as I do now. Overall, I am grateful for the experience because it has allowed me to discover my humanity and the humanity of my fellow man to a level I may never have achieved otherwise.

Cognitive Theory

Introduction

The purpose of this section is to provide a synopsis of the information processing theory of cognition. This theoretical framework will be employed as a vehicle from which to conduct a theoretical analysis of what may have been occurring cognitively within my autoethnographic stories. The goal of the analysis is to describe and construct a reasonable account of what was occurring in terms of the internal workings of my cognitive processes. Importantly, my goal is not historical or empirical veracity, but rather to generate theoretically sound interpretations and inferences about what may have been occurring at the various stages of my life, analyzed from the perspective of the cognitive theory of depression (Clark, Beck, & Alford, 1999). I hope that this document will help novice counselors and students who are interested in cognitive therapy but who are intimidated by the seemingly complex theory. Although I provide only a basic and brief recapitulation of cognitive theory, this will be sufficient to help interested individuals get a functional understanding of this theory and practice. It is hoped that applying the theory directly to an autobiographical narrative will provide a rich platform from which to nourish further understanding of cognitive theory in a novel way.

Depression is a complex disorder that is thought to have multiple causal factors. These factors include issues such as loss, inadequate social skills, imbalanced brain function or chemistry, in addition to cognitive factors (Clark et al, 1999). Cognitive theory does not discount causal factors outside of the cognitive realm (Young, Beck, & Weinberger, 1993); however, this is beyond the scope of this work. Symptoms of depression can occur on many levels. For instance, at the psychological level symptoms include the loss of interest or

pleasure in things that a person used to find interesting or enjoyable (Clark et al, 1999). Other psychological aspects of depression include feelings of agitation and hopelessness. Accompanying this could be physiological symptoms like insomnia, which is a lack of sleep, or hypersomnia, which is the condition of needing excessive amounts of sleep. At the social level depression often results in the depressed person socially isolating him or herself. Regardless of which symptoms of depression a person may have, the bottom line is that major depression causes major disruptions in a person's global functioning. Depression also has a high rate of co-morbidity with other disorders such as anxiety and substance abuse (Clark et al., 1999). From my autoethnography it is clear that my depression was comorbid with other issues; however, the analysis will be from the perspective of basic depression in order to avoid complicating an already complicated theory with the theoretical aspects of the accompanying disorders.

Cognitive Theory of Depression

Beck's cognitive theory is evolutionary in orientation and proposes that the capacity to process information and form cognitive representations of the environment has been fundamental to human adaptation (Clark et al., 1999). This means that humans have evolved the ability to take information provided from both the inner self and outer environment and make meaning from both sources of information. This meaning-making ability is the evolved capacity to form *conceptual representations* of the self and environment. Indeed, according to this theory, the ability to process information and form conceptual representations is what separates humans from lower organisms (Clark et al., 1999).

Contrary to the lower organisms, the information processing ability that humans have evolved allows humans to perceive, assimilate, and elaborate the meaning of experiences.

The important point of all this information about human information processing is that the cognitive theory of depression dictates that individuals respond to what they think about any given experience rather than responding to the experience itself (Mahoney, as cited by Clark et al., 1999). In essence, individuals are not responding to the “actual” event or situation but rather are responding to what they think and believe about the event or situation.

Consequently, this theory contends that our cognitive constructions (or, in other words, internal conceptualization) of a phenomenon are at best an approximate representations of that phenomenon (Clark et al., 1999). Consequently, because humans are responding to cognitive representations (rather than the actual phenomenon) there is for individuals the possibility of dysfunctional consequences, such as depression, when thinking is based on erroneous interpretations. In other words, faulty information processing is a factor that may predispose individuals to issues such as depression (Clark et al., 1999).

According to Clark and his colleagues (1999) a fundamental percept of cognitive theory is that information processing or meaning-making, occurs on a continuum ranging from conscious processing to preconscious processing. Information processing through this continuum results in different degrees of awareness and access to the information that is being processed. At the conscious end of the spectrum, individuals have a high degree of awareness and accessibility to the information processing and its contents. Alternatively, at the preconscious level of the processing spectrum, individuals typically have no awareness or access to the information processing or its contents.

The conscious end of the processing continuum is slow and effortful in its processing and evolutionarily is concerned with aspects such as learning, socialization, communication, and problem solving (Clark et al., 1999). Conversely, on the other end of the continuum the

characteristics of the preconscious include extremely fast and efficient information processing (stimulus driven and heuristic/shortcut processing) and is concerned with the processing of basic survival issues like self preservation, safety, and reproduction. Overall, within human information processing there is a balance between the speed and efficiency of the primordial (evolutionarily older) preconscious and the slower but more directed processing of the conscious end of information processing (Clark et al., 1999). However, the speed and efficiency of preconscious processing comes at a significant cost; it must sacrifice accessibility and accuracy of its information processing, which as will be demonstrated, plays a significant role in the development of depression.

The Three Components of the Cognitive Model

Within cognitive theory, the cognitive model for depression has three components that describe the psychological aspects of depression (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). These three components include the concepts of the cognitive triad, schemas, and cognitive errors.

The First Component: The Cognitive Triad

The first component, the cognitive triad, describes three major cognitive patterns that are found in depression (Beck et al., 1979). The first aspect of the cognitive triad associated with depression is the cognitive pattern of viewing oneself as useless, defective, and lacking the qualities required to attain happiness or success (Beck, 1972). The second component of the cognitive triad is the inability of a depressed individual to alter his/her tendency to make negative interpretations, even if the experience is neutral or positive (Beck, 1972). This propensity for negative interpretations includes all aspects of an individual's information processing including self, others, and the environment as a whole; essentially his/her entire

existence is negative and depressive (Young et al., 1993). The final aspect of the cognitive triad is that individuals with depression have bleak predictions for the future thus anticipating horrible consequences and insurmountable obstacles (Beck et al., 1979).

Before proceeding to the second component of the cognitive model for depression, it is important to point out that a depressed person is *constructing* cognitive representations of self and world that are inaccurate, bleak, and unadaptive (Beck, 1972). Indeed, the cognitive model contends that the emotional issues, virtually nonexistent motivation, and inability to experience pleasure found with depression are consequences of pervasively negative thinking patterns (Beck et al., 1979). Essentially, the negative thoughts produce negative affect and emotions, and even though the negative thoughts are inaccurate, they are experienced as if they were real (Beck et al., 1979). For example, take the person who believes himself to be unlovable, who in reality has many people who like and love him. This individual believes his inaccurate thought of unlovability and thus experiences the emotion that matches the thought. Thus according to cognitive theory the emotions we experience equal the severity of the thoughts that we construct regardless of the actual accuracy of the thought (Clark et al., 1999). Consequently, because human beings actively construct their experiences with varying degrees of accuracy, cognitive theory holds that thoughts are merely hypotheses rather than facts and should be treated as such (DeRubeis, Tang, & Beck, 2001). This point of treating thoughts as hypotheses is particularly important within the therapeutic context of cognitive therapy (DeRubeis, et al, 2001).

The Second Component of the Cognitive Triad: Schemas

According to cognitive theory, a function of information processing is the personal construction of reality. Implicit within this is that because we personalize our experiences

we have the capacity to personalize experiences in an unadaptive manner (Clark et al., 1999). For individuals, the meanings derived from the information processing of particular experiences are constructed from what are called schemas (Clark et al., 1999). Schemas are enduring internal structures (stored information) of previous experiences that are used to organize new information in a meaningful way, thereby determining for the individual their idiosyncratic perception of an experience (Clark et al., 1999).

For the cognitive theory of depression the concept of schema explains why a depressed individual maintains his unadaptive behaviors despite objective evidence that are contrary to his cognitive interpretations (eg., the Ph.D. candidate who views himself as a failure). In basic terms, schemas are an individual's framework of knowledge. This framework of knowledge or information ranges from the general, such as life philosophy, to more specific frameworks such as knowledge about fixing cars (Clark et al., 1999). In essence, we have frameworks for and from all our experiences, which help guide our behavior. For instance, most individuals have a schema or framework of knowledge, about restaurants. This framework of knowledge might include the expectation that when you go to a restaurant that you wait to be seated by the hostess, look at a menu to make selection, give your order to the waiter and so forth. Indeed, the restaurant schema will guide thinking about the restaurant experience in other ways as well, in that an individual will be oriented to being social and jovial rather than thinking about shaving or paying bills.

The concept of schemas is important in the cognitive theory of depression because schemas represent enduring characteristics within an individual that result in specific behavioral tendencies, specifically in this case, of interpreting experiences (Beck et al., 1979). Different individuals will respond in different ways to an experience but an

individual will respond in a consistent way to the same experience; schemas are responsible for consistency of our behavior because they help organize and guide individual behavior (Beck et al., 1979). The meaning assigned to cognitive representations of an experience is constructed by filtering some information, thus removing aspects of information, in addition to adding information through interpretation. Thus, in depression a person is thought to screen out positive and neutral information and only take in negative information in addition to making only negative attributions about and interpretations of the experiences they have in general; all of which are determined by the operations of their schemas (Beck et al., 1979). Importantly, schemas can be restructured, or in other words, individuals can change the content of the schemas, allowing them to alter their interpretative tendencies and behavior (Young et al., 1993). This potential to restructure schemas has important implications for treating depression via cognitive therapy (Young et al., 1993).

In the cognitive theory of depression, all reality construction is thought to be generated through the interaction of the conscious mind and the preconscious (Clark et al., 1999). However, for depressed individuals information processing is thought to be influenced primarily at the preconscious level (Clark et al., 1999). Essentially, it is believed that dominant maladaptive schemas associated with the preconscious select, abstract, and elaborate information, thereby determining an individual's interpretation of an experience (Beck, 1972). What this means is that inaccurate and unadaptive interpretations of the preconscious form frameworks of knowledge (schemas) that are used as a basis for organizing information and experience about the self and the world. The use of pervasively negative and inaccurate information to relate to the self and world results in significant distress on many levels.

The Third Component of the Cognitive Triad

The third component of the cognitive model is the concept of faulty information processing. Faulty information processing (systematic errors in thinking) facilitates the state of depression through maintaining the depressed individual's belief in his/her inaccurate and negative perceptions about self, future, and environment (Beck et al., 1979). Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the issue that it is not that the depressed person's appraisal of reality is flawed, but rather, the problem stems from drawing erroneous conclusions from his/her observations of events (Beck et al., 1979).

The cognitive model makes the distinction between primitive and mature reality construction on the basis of cognitive distortions (Beck et al., 1979). For instance, a common thinking error is to think in terms of absolute dichotomies such as positive and negative. Few things in life are absolute positive or negative, but rather are shades of grey. However, with primitive reality construction, such as when an individual construes his experience as absolutely negative, the emotion that follows reflects his cognition and is as stated earlier equal in severity to the cognition (Beck et al., 1979). Overall, ten cognitive distortions have been identified and are used in cognitive therapy (DeRubeis, et al, 2001) employed. The ten cognitive distortions include all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, mental filter, disqualifying the positive, jumping to conclusions, magnification or minimization, emotional reasoning, should statements, labeling, and personalization (See Appendix 1 for definitions). Aside from the theoretical relevance of cognitive distortions they also serve a heuristic function during therapy as they allow depressed individuals a guide to assess if and how they are engaging in systematic error in terms of their thought process (DeRubeis, et al, 2001). Furthermore, it is important to note that implicit within the preceding is that the cognitive

theory of depression predicts that people with depression make predictable errors in their thinking (Beck et al., 1979).

The Cognitive Model

The next thing one must understand about the function of schemas in the cognitive theory of depression is the kinds of thoughts produced by dominant negative schemas through the interacting processes of the conscious and preconscious. The preconscious produces thoughts that interact with the conscious mind and those thoughts are called *automatic thoughts*. Automatic thoughts are defined as the stream of thinking that coexists with the more manifest conscious stream of thought (Beck, 1995). Automatic thoughts are the end product of preconscious processing and schemas. These type of thoughts, because they come from the preconscious, are extremely fast and brief. Automatic thoughts flash into awareness with no conscious effort, thereby appropriately obtaining the label of “automatic”. Most individuals are not aware that they have the preconscious stream of thought. In essence, the rapid automatic thoughts spontaneously flash into consciousness just beyond the reach of most individuals’ conscious awareness. Nevertheless, even though the conscious mind does not detect the automatic thought the individual’s body detects it and thus the automatic thoughts cause an emotion to be experienced within the body (Beck, 1995).

The fact that automatic thoughts are so fast means that there is no time to evaluate the validity or the meaning behind the thought (Clark et al., 1999). This factor causes the emotion caused by the automatic thought to be accepted without question as a valid interpretation. This uncritical acceptance of the automatic thought is a problem because automatic thoughts operative in depression are almost always negative and based on

cognitive distortions. Automatic thoughts occur in two different forms including verbal messages and visual imagery. The visual imagery typically is rich in subjective information that relates to the owner of the thought (Clark et al., 1999).

In depressive thinking there are three distinct types of automatic thought (Clark et al., 1999). The most common type is a completely distorted thought that is contrary to reality but still accepted as valid even in the presence of contrary evidence. For example, an individual may get a B grade on a test and preconsciously concludes, "I am a total idiot" ("because I did not get an A"). Obviously, this individual is intelligent. In fact, the grade is evidence to the contrary of the individual's conclusion; however, maladaptive processing causes the completely distorted thought to be accepted as valid. The second type of automatic thoughts are cognitions that are accurate but the conclusion drawn from the thought is inaccurate. This type of error is based on overgeneralizations (Clark et al., 1999). For example a person who was not able to keep an appointment has an automatic thought like "I am useless because I did not fulfill my commitment". The thought is accurate in that he did not in fact arrive for the appointment; however, the generalization of one failure to his overall value and capacity as a human being is a monumental overgeneralization. The third type of automatic thought is accurate but dysfunctional. This type of thought is based on arbitrary inference (Clark et al., 1999). For instance, a person who thinks, "My professor did not call on me therefore I am stupid" is engaging in the third type of automatic thought. The thought is accurate in that the professor did not call on him but there is no evidence that the professor thinks that he is unintelligent. What is important to remember about automatic thoughts is that these thoughts for the majority of individuals are not consciously articulated

(Clark et al., 1999). This point is not to be missed as it plays an important role in the therapeutic intervention process.

Automatic thoughts are not the root problem for depression but are a product of faulty information processing resulting from dysfunctional generalized schemas. These more generalized schemas that play a role in depression by producing automatic thoughts are conceptualized as intermediate beliefs and core beliefs. Core beliefs are fundamental conceptions individuals carry about their identity, thereby are the most generalized ideas individuals carry regarding their character or nature. Intermediate beliefs are subordinate to core beliefs and are actually rooted in individual's core beliefs. Intermediate beliefs are composed of rules, attitudes and assumptions. It is important to point out that all individuals have core beliefs and intermediate beliefs. It is the type of information processing that determines whether an individual's beliefs are adaptive or dysfunctional (e.g. faulty information processing versus adaptive processing).

There are three types of dysfunctional intermediate beliefs implicated in depression (Clark et al., 1999). The first type of intermediate beliefs is conditional rules and take the form of "if then" statements. Common conditional rules in depression are "if I am criticized then it means that I have failed", or "if I please this person then she will treat me well".

The second type of dysfunctional intermediate beliefs are called imperative beliefs and are characterized by words like "should" or "must" (Clark et al., 1999). Examples of this type of intermediate belief include "I must be loved by everyone" and "I should never make a mistake". The third type of intermediate belief is classified as compensatory beliefs (Clark et al., 1999). These beliefs are based on compensatory actions that directly reflect a core belief.

For example, if an individual's core belief is "I am unlovable" the compensatory belief may be "If I am not perfect then people will reject me".

Out of the dominant maladaptive schemas, core beliefs are the most generalized type and are simply defined as rigid, global ideas about one's self. Core beliefs are believed to come in two basic forms (Beck, 1995) and in depressed individuals, they are expressed as all encompassing and absolute statements. Examples of the two types of depressive core beliefs are "I am helpless" and "I am unlovable" (Beck, 1995). Core beliefs are the source from which all other thoughts and beliefs stem from, in that core beliefs influence the development of intermediate beliefs, which, in turn influence cognitive products including conscious thoughts and automatic thoughts. It is important to make the distinction between *belief* and *thought* in that a belief is an enduring internal structure, a schema, as opposed to a thought whose duration is measured in milliseconds.

Consequently, core and intermediate beliefs can be expressed as a thought but are more fundamental and enduring.

Implicit within the preceding information, but key to understanding cognitive theory, is the contention that the cognitive constructions a person creates from and about an experience are at best, an approximation of that experience (Clark et al., 1999). Recall that this theory states that individuals do not actually respond to the experience at hand but rather to cognitive representations of the experience. In essence, each individual will create a different representation of a particular experience based on the contents of their schemata. Importantly within cognitive theory, especially in the therapeutic context, because of the constructivist nature of our reality construction the adaptivness of thoughts takes precedence over accuracy in regards to evaluating an experience. The point is that since there is no

absolute or “true” meaning that can be attributed to an event or person, therefore we are free to choose adaptive meaning constructions. Finally, at this point it is also important to note that all individuals have inaccuracy and inconsistencies in their cognitive constructions that result from information processing (Clark et al., 1999).

Depressed and Non Depressed: What is the difference?

As outlined previously, problems such as depression occur when there is a systematic error in an individual’s information processing leading to issues such as processing information about self in a consistently negative manner. Interestingly, all individuals have automatic thoughts and cognitive distortions; however, problems such as depression do not occur in all individuals (Clark et al., 1999). The state of depression is thought to be avoided by some individuals, quite simply through spontaneous adaptive responses to automatic thoughts. For example, take a student who is reading a particularly difficult chapter in their math text. The student’s conscious effortful cognition is focused on reading the text and trying to integrate and make sense of the information. While reading the text the student gets an automatic thought such as “I don’t understand this” which causes an intense feeling of hopelessness. The student then spontaneously corrects the maladaptive thought with a more adaptive thought like “but I will get it if I try hard” which eliminates the feeling of hopelessness. Essentially, the cognitive theory of depression decrees that non-clinical individuals are both constructivists and empiricists (Clark et al., 1999). What this means is that non-depressed individuals actively construct reality but at the same time, on some level, evaluate the validity and utility of their thoughts and emotions and make appropriate adjustments when and where necessary (Clark et al., 1999). Depressed individuals, on the

other hand, are thought to be constructivists who do not evaluate or moderate their cognitions (Clark et al., 1999).

Cognitive Therapy

Fundamental to cognitive theory is that a person's dysfunctional beliefs are learned. Consequently, the aim of cognitive therapy is to help individuals unlearn dysfunctional beliefs and replace those beliefs with beliefs that are more accurate and functional (Clark et al., 1999). Within the system of cognitive therapy the goal of overcoming dysfunctional beliefs is sought through becoming fully conscious of, and learning how to identify automatic thoughts (Young et al., 1993). Importantly, cognitive theory outlines that thoughts and feelings are considered distinct phenomena and that thoughts create feelings (Leahy, 2003).

Cognitive therapists help clients to become conscious of and to identify automatic thoughts by teaching them to self monitor for changes in emotion (Leahy, 2003). This is because, as mentioned previously, automatic thoughts always cause a change in emotion. The therapist then helps the client learn how to evaluate the contents of the automatic thought (Beck, 1995). These two steps are not always easy at first, but like anything else, with practice anybody can develop the skills necessary for effective cognitive management. The main difficulty in identifying the meaning of an automatic thought lies in the speed of the preconscious. The speed of the automatic thought makes it difficult for individuals to fully articulate the thought consciously to themselves (Beck, 1995). For example, a depressed individual in therapy suddenly feels a change in affect. Feeling anxious, she attempts to identify her automatic thoughts. A therapist must help clients move from identifying the automatic thoughts through stating telegraphic or question thoughts, which only reflect the content of the automatic thoughts, to a deeper awareness of the underlying meaning of the

automatic thoughts (Beck, 1995). For instance, the client may identify an automatic thought as “What if I don’t succeed in therapy?” The key for the cognitive therapist is to guide the individual to get to the core meaning of the automatic thought, which in this case would be something like “I am incapable of success”. Key to interpreting automatic thoughts is to turn telegraphic or question thoughts into self referent statements which is the form automatic thoughts always take (Beck, 1995).

Once the automatic thought has been identified, the next step in cognitive therapy is for the therapist to teach the client how to investigate the validity and utility of the automatic thoughts they are having (DeRubeis, et al, 2001). In brief, this process involves evaluating the thought to see how many cognitive distortions are involved in the thought. This serves to demonstrate the invalidity of the thought and the errors that are being made in processing information (DeRubeis, et al, 2001). The next step involves the examination of evidence for and against the particular automatic thought in terms of the client’s lived experience (DeRubeis, et al, 2001). The process of identifying the automatic thought as a cognitive distortion and the process of not finding evidence in support of the automatic thought helps the client see through their cognitive error, thus seeing that the thought is invalid or unhelpful (Leahy, 2003). Next the therapist teaches the client to replace the negative automatic thought with a more valid and adaptive thought (Beck, 1995). The hypothesis here is that by directing the attentional resources of conscious thinking to the preconscious and challenging the unrealistic unadaptive thoughts the unadaptive thought and its effects are cancelled (Beck, 1995).

This cognitive process provides immediate relief from the negative emotion brought upon by the automatic thought, which reflects the power of this therapeutic approach. In

essence, when people replace unadaptive thoughts with adaptive cognitions there is an instant shift to positive affect. For example, take the student who scored a B grade on her exam. Her automatic thought is "I am stupid (because I did not get an A)." This automatic thought is followed by a depressive emotion. Having identified the automatic thought, she then challenges it. She examines the cognitive distortions at play, which non-exhaustively include all or nothing thinking, overgeneralization, filtering and labeling (Note: it only takes one cognitive distortion to identify a thought as erroneous). She then looks for evidence in support of the thought. "In reality does scoring a B indicate stupidity?" The answer is obviously a resounding "NO!". Evidence against the automatic thought of "I am stupid" is that a B score is above average performance. The student through challenging and evaluating the automatic thought then replaces the automatic thought with a more adaptive and valid observation such as: "Although not perfect, scoring a B indicates above average intelligence". This correction process instantaneously replaces the depressive emotion with a more adaptive emotion like satisfaction, pleasure, or even acceptance (Clark et al., 1999). Essentially, when this individual realizes her cognitive errors and then replaces them with more useful and accurate thoughts the depressive affect disappears (Clark et al., 1999).

Through first working with and changing automatic thoughts, an individual subsequently learns about his/her intermediate beliefs and core beliefs. The process of dealing with these beliefs is the same as working with automatic thoughts ; however, this is where persistence and patience comes in for successful therapy (Beck, 1995). Intermediate beliefs are not as malleable or changeable as automatic thoughts but they are easier to change than core beliefs. The main point however, is that with time persistence, and patience, all beliefs are changeable. In essence, once an individual's core beliefs are realized, the utility

and validity is assessed which helps the client to recognize situations where core beliefs are negatively influencing his/her experience and reactions (DeRubeis, et al, 2001). Awareness of core beliefs and their utility and validity empowers the individual to consider alternative hypothesis about oneself or situation that are more adaptive and accurate (DeRubeis, et al, 2001). Overall, the more a belief is activated (experienced) the more easy and likely it is to be experienced again in the future (Clark et al., 1999). Essentially, a biased type of perceptual fluency results with each activation, with the schema activating more strongly, more easily, and faster (Clark et al., 1999). On the other hand, the reverse also applies, in that if the activation of a belief is avoided or circumvented (i.e. via cognitive therapy), the belief is less likely it is to be experienced in the future. This situation applies to both positive and negative thoughts equally. Overall, with schemas it is a “use it or lose it” situation where the goal is to avoid activation of negative beliefs being experienced, diminishing their power and availability (Clark et al., 1999). With time and perseverance, full cognitive restructuring can be achieved and occurs when the unadaptive beliefs are replaced with more accurate adaptive beliefs at all levels of the cognitive hierarchy (Clark et al., 1999).

Summary

The cognitive theory of depression as developed by Beck (1972), states that individuals develop depression because they have maladaptive thoughts. Absolute and pervasive negative thinking about one's self, world and future characterize the maladaptive thoughts of depression (Beck et al., 1979). The negative cognitions, appraisals, and perspectives of depression are a result of the primal processing of the preconscious and its schemata (Clark et al., 1999). For example, a common depressive *belief* which is an enduring internal structure, a schema (as opposed to a thought whose duration is in

milliseconds), is, "I am worthless". These beliefs elicit depressive thoughts, which create depressive emotions that influence the overall emotional state, physiology, and behavior in a negative way, leading to the development of depression (Clark et al., 1999). The changes brought about create schemas that contain abstractions of experiences that embody feelings of worthlessness, failure, and loss. The negative affective states of depression are also characterized by an increased accessibility of the negative maladaptive schemas (Clark et al., 1999). Essentially, the active depressive schema becomes hypervalent, in that it is easily activated or "turned on" but difficult to deactivate or "turn off". The hypervallence comes about by continual activation of the schema, with each activation making the schema activate more strongly, more easily, and faster (Clark et al., 1999). The negative schema performs the functions of a schema, such as, filtering elements of experience as well as adding additional information, which in a depressive case is biased towards filtering positive and adding negative interpretations. Consequently, the schema influences all encompassing negative behavior for the individual with the depressive schema (Clark et al., 1999). Fundamentally, there is a vicious cycle between belief and thoughts, which constructs a thoroughly negative and depressing reality. The resulting negative cognitions stemming from unadaptive information processing will critically influence the behavioral affective, somatic, and motivational states of the individual, and present symptoms of depression across these areas of functioning (Clark et al., 1999). Treating depression with cognitive therapy involves teaching depressed individuals to process information like healthy individuals. This involves the depressed individual becoming both a constructivist, actively creating their experience, and also an empiricist, thus actively evaluating the validity of their thoughts (Clark et al., 1999).

The chapter that follows is an analysis of my autoethnographic stories through a cognitive lens. I offer this as a reasonable possible account of what may have occurred for me at a psychological level as seen through the lens of Aaron Beck's (1972) cognitive theory. To elaborate, the stories in of themselves paint a dramatic picture of significant events in my life that had significant impacts on my development. Consequently, the stories serve as concrete and "visible" representations of events and experiences in my life. In contrast to the events and experiences contained within the stories, the cognitive processes that occurred are less visible and require informed interpretation to come to reasonable conclusions about the cognitive phenomena that took place. Through the stories and theoretical synopsis provided, the intention is to provide the reader with a reasonable construction of a cognitive map outlining a realistic account of the cognitive phenomena that not only led to my depression but also to its subsequent defeat.

Cognitive Process Analysis

In the following section, I present an analysis as a reasonable account of what may have occurred for me at a psychological level through the lens of cognitive theory. It is not intended as a definitive statement of causation or etiology. The stories in and of themselves paint a dramatic picture of significant events in my life that influenced my development. Consequently, the stories serve as concrete and “visible” representations of events and experiences in my life. In contrast to the events and experiences contained within the stories, the cognitive processes that occurred are less visible and require informed interpretation to come to reasonable conclusions about the cognitive events. Overall, my intention is to provide the reader with a reasonable construction of a cognitive map that references my stories and outlines a plausible account of the cognitive components and processes related to the development and conquering of my depressive thinking. This arrangement is a fitting means to fulfill the previously stated goal of presenting an alternative, more concrete, form of learning the power of cognitive theory and therapy through combining the power of evocative ethnography with more canonical forms of knowing.

The aim of this analysis is not to scrutinize every detail within every story; instead the aim is to focus on and interpret salient elements that will provide the structure for understanding, *in vivo*, the cognitive theory of depression. In order to facilitate the cognitive analysis, personal subjective interpretation is required to fully illustrate the issues under consideration. However, this serves to facilitate the goal of this document rather than detract from it. Further, it is important to understand that within this document the apparent sequential development of the cognitive components is merely an artifact employed to facilitate the explanation of the cognitive processes involved.

Development of Depressive Thinking

Before beginning, the analysis is a brief recapitulation about beliefs and thoughts. Cognitively there is a hierarchical structuring of beliefs that lead to the quality and functionality of thoughts that we have. At the top of the hierarchy are core beliefs, which lead to the development of intermediate beliefs. Both levels of belief influence the actual thoughts we have at both the conscious and preconscious levels. Recall as well that core beliefs are believed to form, for the most part, in childhood (often through exchanges with parents) and are formed through the interactions of primitive processing and personal experience (Clark, Beck, & Alford, 1999).

There are basically only two kinds of maladaptive core beliefs that underlie depression (Beck, 1995). Specifically, one kind of core belief is the belief that one is completely and utterly unlovable, and the other core belief is the belief that one is utterly helpless in an adaptive fashion (i.e. incapable making friends, holding a job, survival, etc). With the knowledge that the intensity of a thought or belief will produce an emotion of equal intensity, it is easy to see why core beliefs can lead to the development of depression if left unchecked. If one contemplates the emotional effect of "*knowing*" that you are utterly unlovable, without the mitigating effects of rationality from the conscious mind, we can easily infer that it is a devastating and painful emotional experience. The psychological effect is so powerful that it can and does manifest as physical pain. A similar analysis can be derived from the helpless core belief. Fortunately, however, despite the horrible impact of these negative core beliefs, for most individuals these negative core beliefs are nothing more than cognitive constructs and not absolute facts of reality. The next section will analyze

story one of the autoethnography and demonstrate the cognitive process involved of the development of my core beliefs.

Analysis of Story 1

The events described in the first story occurred when I was about four years old, and is about a family outing that ends in disaster. From this first story, it is clear that the experiences that I encountered as a child were the type of experiences that typically facilitate the development of both depressive core beliefs. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the development of such core beliefs as being unlovable and helpless are not necessarily based on qualitatively different or mutually exclusive sorts of events. In essence, an individual can develop one or both core beliefs from a single event or experience. In my situation, right from the first story, it is clear that I had experiences that could facilitate the development of both depressive core beliefs. The rejection from my father, combined with the trauma resulting from the actions of my mother are all fertile grounds from which to infer the development of deeply ingrained beliefs that I was both helpless and unlovable.

My Father

This analysis begins with experiences that I had with my father that led to the progression of my depressive core beliefs. My father is not a major character in the story, and this reflects how he was not a major character in my life either. Nevertheless, the limited experiences that I did have with my father were of a caliber to facilitate harmful outcomes. Within the first story, I briefly outline the cruel fashion with which my father relates to not only myself, but to the entire family. It was a toxic situation, and within this difficult context, I remember wondering why my father did not spend time with the family and why he was so cruel when he did. These childhood musings had disastrous effects because of the

primitive processing of the pre-conscious. I remember that I concluded that my father was behaving cruelly because I was unlovable. Further, I remember thinking that I was unlovable because I was consistently experiencing the horribly painful feelings of being a uniquely flawed individual. In this situation, I was feeling flawed and like any person, I examined the feelings of feeling flawed, and erroneously concluded that I truly was flawed as a human being. In essence, through primitive preconscious processing I was engaging in the *emotional reasoning* type of cognitive distortion. Recall that *emotional reasoning* is the cognitive distortion that allows an individual to believe that the feeling that they are experiencing is the truth of the situation. Specifically, in my situation I felt flawed so assumed that I really was in fact flawed. As a result of the cognitive distortion, I inferred that this condition of being unlovable was due to being flawed and the reason why my father was so unkind to me. Thus, over time, through the continuation of negative interactions with my father and the maladaptive primitive information processing in which I was engaging, I very rapidly developed a very dangerous thinking style that strongly reinforced the unlovable core belief.

On the whole, throughout the first story, it is easy to understand how I could believe that I was unlovable; however, it is not as readily evident as to how I could develop the helpless core belief. One salient example, however, of how the helpless core belief may have developed is how with my father, no matter how hard I tried, I could never please him or gain his approval. Essentially, all my attempts to get him to love and accept me failed and even backfired, facilitating the unlovable core belief. Over time, however, due to the growing number of failures associated with father's acceptance, the belief that I was helpless became deeply ingrained.

This situation with my father, through which I learned to believe that I was helpless, is closely tied to the *overgeneralization* cognitive distortion. Quite simply, through preconscious cognitive distortions, the experience of failure that I had incurred in dealing with my father began to be generalized to many other areas of my life. As a result of this generalization, I began to be burdened by the underlying belief that I was helpless in terms of attaining happiness or success in almost all situations. Over time, further aggravating my situation, was the contributing factor of *self fulfilling prophecy effects*. Essentially, through believing that I was helpless, I behaved as if helpless even in situations where I could have excelled. This led to a deeper level of helplessness because it occurred outside the family context in the general social context (i.e. with peers). It is clear that harmful environmental interactions along with my preconscious dominant thinking style led to the depressive core beliefs.

My Mother

My relationship with my mother was different from that with my father because, at times, I did feel loved by her. Nevertheless, the interactions I had with my mother also helped to facilitate and reinforce the unlovable and helpless core beliefs. As one can infer from the story, my mother at that point in time was in a desperate situation. She was halfway around the world, away from her homeland and family, and married to a tyrant who did not care whether his family went hungry or not. Young as I was in the first story, my mother did not hide her situation from me. Essentially, I was able to fully comprehend and deeply connect to her desperation and helplessness. After all, as the story demonstrates, my mother was not skilled in managing or even hiding her emotions. Frequently, she freely shared her thoughts and emotions regarding the dire situation we were in as a family. During these

emotional outbursts, I recall feeling my mother's desperation, which was followed by the desperate need to be of immediate assistance to her. I was a young child and felt completely helpless to assist her, thus compounding a very generalized sense of helplessness. I describe it as the feeling of existential helplessness. The only thing I could do or offer to help my mother was to try to comfort her and offer my affection, which I often tried. However, more times than not, any attempt I made to comfort my mother in this kind of situation was callously rejected. These negative interactions with my mother facilitated the development of both depressive core beliefs.

In essence, I experienced the ongoing trauma of exposure to adult issues as a child, that facilitated the development of the helpless core belief through. The helpless belief, however, was further reinforced by the kind of thinking that I was engaging in within the situation. Specifically, I recall making many *should statements* during those interactions with my mother. Beck argued that *should statements* are a form of cognitive distortion because they are founded in unrealistic or invalid expectations. In my case, I was telling myself that 'I should be able to comfort my mother' and that 'I should be able to help the family', all of which are very unrealistic standards for a child to hold.

Further enhancing the development of the unlovable core belief was that my mother rejected my attempts at affection. When I was rejected, I would immediately feel the emotional pain that accompanied the thought that I was utterly unlovable. In this situation, I was engaging in the *all-or-nothing thinking* cognitive distortion. I was not seeing the situation in realistic terms. If I had held a more realistic perspective of my situation, I would have acknowledged that at times my mother did show me love, demonstrating that I was loveable. Nevertheless, because of the preconscious dominant processing, for me there were

no shades of grey in the situation, and no mitigating circumstances; I was utterly unlovable. Once again, the general pattern that is evident is that I was exposed to harmful situations that had the effect of creating depressive core beliefs that were subsequently inappropriately reinforced through dysfunctional and unadaptive thinking.

The rigid and global nature of negative core beliefs, once developed, “colored in” all of my subsequent perceptions of others, the environment, and myself. Indeed, the global influence of the negative core beliefs is evident near the end of the story when I reveal my childhood secret: the belief that I was forsaken by God and punished by God through being created powerless and unlovable. This dramatic revelation makes it obvious that I have both developed and integrated variations of both depressive core beliefs.

Overall, the point of this analysis is to demonstrate how I developed negative core beliefs, thus going from (presumed) functionally adaptive core beliefs (as evidenced by the adaptive processing in the start of the story), to maladaptive core beliefs. The maladaptive core beliefs did not manifest only over the time of the story but over an extended period. As can be inferred, I made a shift from adaptive (or partially adaptive) beliefs to maladaptive cognitive processing through the effects of continuous exposure to harmful and abusive situations. Compounding the maladaptive cognitive shift to depressive core beliefs were my perceptions of my personal experiences through the primitive pre-conscious that resulted in distorted interpretations (although beyond the scope of this document the preconscious dominance is developmental in nature).

Now that I have explored the process of how my negative core beliefs emerged (which laid the foundations for a depressive reality), the section that follows will delineate the role of the cognitive components (such as schemata) in my personal experiences in more

detail. Importantly, in the time lapse between story one and two, between four and nine years of age, it can be inferred that the preconscious maladaptive processing became so entrenched that it was dominant in creating the “default” schemata from which I experienced and interpreted life. In essence, due to maladaptive information processing (meaning making), I developed a default framework (schema) about myself, founded in the two depressive core beliefs, that delineated that I was utterly unlovable and worthless, while at the same time, facilitating perceptions of the environment and people in general as threatening and rejecting.

Analysis of Story 2

Story two takes place during my mid-childhood years and is about a very negative day in school, when events ultimately led me to inappropriately solve a social dispute through violence. In the second story, it is quite clear that I had developed some very entrenched negative schemata that were directly connected to both depressive core beliefs. Schemas are composed of stored information, about previous experiences, that are used to organize new information in a meaningful way. Consequently, schemas guide, organize, and determine the perception and behavior relating to particular experiences (Clark et al., 1999). Evidence of entrenched negative schemata and negative core beliefs is demonstrated throughout the second story. For instance, almost all of my thinking was driven by a negative and depressing perspective. In cognitive terms, it is clear that I had developed a negative hypervalent schema (characteristic of depression thinking). This type of schema is not only very easily activated by a wide range of stimuli but, Clark et al (1999) argue, it is also resistant to deactivation once activated.

It is obvious, during this phase of my life, that a negative schema is in operation because of the dysfunctional thinking. The hypervallence of the schemata, however, becomes evident later in the mall, where everything was being interpreted as negative and there was no cessation of negative thinking or perceptions. In basic terms, even though I was in the company of a friend and at the mall, a situation which normally contains some positive experiences for most individuals, I was depressed because my schemata were selecting only negative interperetations.

This issue of schematically selecting only negative interperetations is reflective of preconicious processing. More specifically, it is the preconicious cognitive distortion called *mental filtering*. Filtering information from the environment is a natural and adaptive function of our information processing system; however, when individuals consistently filter out positive and neutral information they are in danger of developing a depressive reality as I did. Because of my hypervallent negative schemata, I did not notice any of the positive things that were happening. For instance, in perceiving only the negative in the mall, I did not notice the kind person who held the door for me or the friendly clerk who smiled. Furthermore, through the *catastrophizing/minimizing* cognitive distortion my negative schemata were being further strengthened and expanded. The strengthening and expansion occurs via constant activation and via incorporation of negative interpretations to new experiences. For instance, catastrophizing is thinking that “makes a mountain out of a molehill.” The catastrophizing cognitive distortion was in operation when I tripped and looked down to see my lace had come undone and then interpreted that as if it was the end of the world. This negative interpretation of my untied shoelace expanded my negative schemata because I had never interpreted a loosened shoe lace as a (devastating) negative

event previously. Thus, through the negative interpretation via cognitive distortion, I incorporated another experience as a depressive experience.

Furthermore, during this time of my life the *minimization* aspect of the *catastrophizing/minimizing* cognitive distortion is also in operation. Essentially, I was engaging in the minimization aspect of this distortion when I was minimizing all my abilities and potential. Essentially, I saw myself as unable to ever have the things that I could not afford on that day.

Overall, it is clear that the *cognitive triad* associated with depression was in full operation. Firstly, the three cognitive patterns are readily evident: 1) I viewed myself as useless and lacking qualities required to attain happiness or success (Beck, 1972); 2) I appeared unable to alter my tendency to make negative interpretations (Beck, 1972); 3) I had a bleak prediction for the future and anticipated negative consequences and insurmountable obstacles (Beck, 1972). Secondly, entrenched negative schemata were facilitating a depressive reality through negative interpretations and behaviors. Thirdly, I was clearly engaging in faulty information processing. The systematic thinking errors or cognitive distortions that were in operation facilitated my depressive state through maintaining my belief in my inaccurate and negative perceptions (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). By the end of the story there is the indication that a dysfunctional *intermediate belief* was being formed from a dysfunctional attempt at coping: that if I were physically strong enough, I could intimidate people into respecting me. The analysis of the next story focuses on dysfunctional *intermediate beliefs*.

Analysis of Story 3

Story three takes place during my teen years and demonstrates dysfunctional coping through the use of drugs and rebellion. In the previous two stories, I described experiences that led to the development of dysfunctional cognitive processing. The first story demonstrates the development of core beliefs, whereas the second story demonstrates the consequences of the core beliefs. The consequences of the core beliefs were vast in that they influenced every aspect of my existence including my intrapersonal and interpersonal worlds. As cognitive theory delineates, intermediate beliefs also encompass our inner and outer worlds, are rooted in core beliefs, and are composed of the rules, attitudes, and assumptions to which we subscribe (Clark et al., 1999).

Since the intermediate beliefs are rooted in the core beliefs then logically by extension they will reflect the qualities of the core beliefs. Recall that the *conditional rule* type of intermediate belief often takes the form of "if...then..." statements (Clark et al., 1999). By my teen years, it is apparent that I had developed some very dysfunctional *conditional rules*. From story three, we can easily infer that the most salient *conditional rule* that I was living with was "If I stay angry and resentful then I won't hurt so bad". At that point in my life I remember contemplating this issue of how the respect that I was receiving from others was based on the fear that they felt towards me. At times I was proud and relished this, but at other times, I wished it did not have to be that way. Unfortunately for me, I did not know any other way to be, especially with the crushing weight of the core beliefs I was carrying which were insidiously sabotaging my attempts at becoming someone different. Essentially, at that time, because of my information processing, I was a prisoner within my own being.

Another intermediate belief that is evident in story three is the *imperative belief* type of cognitive distortion. These are statements employing the terms “should” or “must” and they usually are characterized by a rigid and absolute rule. From story three, it is clear that there were several *imperative beliefs* to which I subscribed. For example, at that time I seemed to believe that “I must reject all people, before they reject me.” Another *imperative belief* that was evident is “I should hate God because God hates me.” The remaining type of intermediate belief, compensatory in nature, is *compensatory beliefs*. In the stage of my life described in story three one compensatory belief that I had was, “If I get big, strong, and look dangerous, then people will have to respect me.”

Overall, the rigid and global negative beliefs that I held about myself were having a tremendous impact on how I constructed my life experience and reality. The core beliefs facilitated the construction of pervasively negative schemas, which in turn further reinforced the core beliefs. From the core beliefs, the less generalized intermediate beliefs emerged which also were negative and further reinforced the core beliefs by facilitating the construction of negative experiences. For example, my dysfunctional coping attempt, driven by the imperative belief that “I must reject all others before they reject me,” becomes a vicious circle of dysfunction and pain. The third story provides an illustration of how, through my dysfunctional information processing, I had created a miserable existence.

The final product of information processing, that includes the influence of core beliefs and intermediate beliefs, is the *automatic thought*. An *automatic thought* is the product of the preconscious, and is a subtle type of thought, that occurs in tandem with obvious conscious thoughts. Most individuals are not aware of the content or meaning of automatic thoughts but are keenly aware of their effect because *automatic thoughts* cause an

immediate change in affect. When considering the negative core beliefs and the unadaptive intermediate beliefs I was using, it only makes sense that many of the *automatic thoughts* that my preconscious produced would be negative and dysfunctional.

An excellent example of my preconscious *automatic thoughts* in action, and how the preconconscious interacts with the conscious mind, occurred within this third story excerpt as I was watching television. An attractive adolescent female, who looked about my age, caught my eye and I tuned in. I turned up the volume and understood that she was trying to convey her unconditional love to her boyfriend. For a span of seconds, I felt anxious and nauseous, but automatically, in defense, my darkness won over and my discomfort was smothered by anger and derision.

Within the preceding excerpt, my conscious mind was fully occupied with two tasks. The tasks include the close examination of the attractive attributes of the female actor, in addition to trying to decipher the message she was communicating to her boyfriend. In this situation the rapid processing of my preconconscious mind was working in tandem with my conscious mind and was evidenced by the anxiety and nausea that I experienced. The anxiety and nausea were the affective consequence of an automatic thought generated by the preconconscious stream of thought. The contents of the automatic thought that I experienced during that event, considering my core beliefs and the romantic theme on the television, was presumably analogous to "Nobody can ever love me". During the experience itself, I was not aware that I had experienced an automatic thought. During the event, all I knew was that I was experiencing some very uncomfortable and unacceptable emotions that I attempted to manage through dysfunctional action.

It is evident that the preconscious mind caused the automatic thought in this situation because my conscious mind did not produce any negative or distressing cognition during the event. This is important because according to cognitive theory we must have cognition in order to experience an emotion, whether from the conscious stream of thought or preconscious stream of thought.

In my opinion, the shift in emotion that occurred shifting between anxiety and nausea to anger and derision was the result of my coping attempt through my dysfunctional intermediate beliefs. More specifically, in this situation the intermediate belief is of the *imperative* category and has contents analogous to "I must conquer all weakness through anger and resentment, because anger gives me power." In this situation, I was trying to cope with intermediate beliefs, but rather than helping the situation, I created a cycle of self-abuse through dealing with a perceived weakness in myself via toxic emotions and self-castigation.

Automatic thoughts are almost always negative in addition to being cognitive distortions (Clark et al., 1999). Consequently, the "nobody will ever love me" automatic thought that I experienced falls into several overlapping cognitive distortion categorizations as is usually the case. The fortune telling cognitive distortion is perhaps the most obvious for the "nobody will ever love me" negative statement, as it is based on a negative prediction. Not to be missed, individuals try to cope with painful emotions caused by distorted automatic thoughts; however, often the coping attempt is unsound in part because individuals are not aware of the automatic thought that causes the painful emotion. Further, coping attempts are often based on dysfunctional intermediate beliefs, which exacerbate the situation rather than help it.

In summation, in the analysis of the preceding three stories I have described and provided examples of the components of depressive thinking from the information processing account of cognitive theory. In essence, cognitive components including core beliefs, intermediate beliefs, cognitive distortions, and automatic thoughts were presented to demonstrate the development and maintenance of depressive thinking. The analysis that follows of the final two stories exemplifies the therapeutic effects and process of cognitive therapy.

Story Four and Story Five

I have consolidated stories four and five under one section in order to avoid the redundancy in analyzing these related stories individually. Essentially, much of the cognitive phenomena that occurred within story four stay stable through story five as the adaptive cognitive changes are maintained and strengthened. Story four is an exemplar of the powerful therapeutic effects of cognitive therapy. Story five is also an exemplar of cognitive therapy's powerful therapeutic effects, but takes the issue one step further and shows the durability of cognitive therapy's therapeutic effects and its efficacy in relapse prevention. These final two stories are a dramatic example of how I was able to effect change through cognitive therapy in not only my cognitive schemata and thinking style but every aspect of my lived experience; from how I relate to my self to how I experience the social world. Prior to initiating the analysis of the remaining stories, I will briefly digress in order to describe the central aspects of how I was able to change my existence so dramatically in the time that elapsed between story three and story four.

My Cognitive Regimen

Story four describes how I had been practicing cognitive therapy for approximately two years before the start of the story. Consequently, before initiating a more specific level analysis of cognitive phenomena, it is important to consider the considerable period of time that elapsed since I had first started self-help with cognitive therapy. To provide this background, I will briefly outline what had occurred cognitively and therapeutically.

From the cognitive perspective, the broad change within me of shifting away from preconscious dominant processing to conscious dominant processing had its origins in my initiation of a cognitive regimen consisting of monitoring for and correcting negative automatic thoughts. This process of self-monitoring, in of itself, was a challenge due to the fact that most individuals, including myself at that time, do not dedicate much cognitive resources to changes that occur in affect from moment to moment. I was aware of the potential difficulties associated with self-monitoring but being steadfast in my commitment to changing my life, I engaged in several creative behaviors that facilitated getting into a routine, and thus became skilled with self-monitoring and thought challenging. One strategy that I employed was setting the timer on my wristwatch to beep every thirty minutes. The beep at thirty-minute intervals was my cue to assess my emotional state and the thoughts that were pervasive in my consciousness both at the conscious and pre-conscious level.

Another strategy that I employed was to draw a different symbol on my hand each day so that each time I saw the symbol that too was my cue to tune in consciously to my emotional state and thought process. Just as important, I also employed different sounding alarms to wake me in the morning as a reminder to begin the process of thought management from the moment I woke up. Incorporating the alarm method in the mornings was a godsend

because, much like other individuals prone to depressive thinking, mornings were when my thoughts and emotions were particularly negative. I found that curbing the negative style of thinking right at the start of the day had the effect of setting the tone for the rest of the day. Employing 'post it' notes with reminders around the house like the bathroom mirror and coffee cupboard was also useful in getting into the routine.

In the initial stages of learning thought management, I started with a simplified approach, as opposed to performing a full thought investigation. Whenever I had a change in emotion, I simply assessed my thoughts to determine whether the thoughts I was producing were valid or if the thoughts were cognitive distortions. This simple process alone was capable of reducing the negative affect that accompanied the cognitive distortions that my mind was habitually producing. It was not long before I had the confidence, and indeed the motivation, to perform full thought investigations. After seeing how therapeutically powerful monitoring for and correcting distortions was, I was driven to engage the full power of the technique through performing the full thought investigations. A full thought investigation, in addition to assessing for cognitive distortions, includes investigating lived experience to find evidence that supports or refutes the automatic thought, and includes replacing the automatic thought with a thought that is more valid and adaptive. Typically there is minimal evidence supporting cognitive distortions; if there is real evidence, problem solving is initiated.

Performing the skill of thought monitoring and correction on a consistent basis eventually cleared the way towards not only mastery of the skill, but also a massive improvement in my mood and quality of life. In order to obtain a skilled level of thought monitoring and challenging, much like any other skill, however, it required me to be diligent

and dedicated to the process. For instance, aside from the issue of remembering to monitor and learn the skills, apathy was often an obstacle. Apathy was a problem in the first phases of learning the skill in that, sometimes, I found it easier just to wallow in a negative emotion than to perform a thought investigation. Furthermore, after a long day, and particularly at nighttime when I was lowest in terms of cognitive resources and cognitive energy, I found it was most difficult to engage the cognitive strategy and exert the cognitive effort needed to perform the skills. The cognitive effort required to perform a thought investigation in my opinion is analogous to the experience of having to solve an unfamiliar (but not too difficult) mathematical equation when very tired. Conscious thought is slow and effortful to employ, therefore, dedication and commitment are of paramount importance. On the whole, however, I found that the immediate reduction of negative affect brought about by performing a thought investigation provided the impetus to sustain the motivation and commitment required to keep up the therapeutic regimen.

The skill of performing a full thought investigation, of itself, is not excessively difficult to learn or perform. Aside from issues such as cognitive exertion, the biggest obstacle for myself, especially when first starting the therapeutic process, was having the courage to "look inside". The thoughts that the preconscious produces during depressive episodes are almost always negative in addition to being self-referent, making them painful to examine. Furthermore, I found that it took courage to be honest and to take responsibility for preconscious thoughts and beliefs and own them. Essentially, no person enjoys consciously accounting for the negative beliefs he or she has concerning their self and, therefore, it is all too easy to deny or rationalize their existence. Indeed, when I first became conscious of some of the preconscious thoughts and beliefs I had about myself, the pain

caused me to try to rationalize them out of existence (i.e. "That can't be right, I know I am loveable..."). Nevertheless, I was able to take responsibility and own the components of my preconscious processing and that allowed me to begin the healing process through cognitive therapy.

I clearly remember one instance when I first started employing full thought investigation, when it really dawned on me the power of this technique. This instance of thought investigation effectively demonstrates the interaction between the preconscious and conscious mind. The incident took place, ironically, as I was reading a book on cognitive therapy. As I was reading, my wristwatch beeped, which was my cue to assess my affective state. After assessing my emotional state, I realized that I was feeling rather anxious. My conscious mind was occupied with reading and making sense of the information in the book, so I knew to explore my preconscious stream of thought. I closed my eyes and looked inside, asking myself, "What was going through my mind?" This simple form of introspection is how I learned to "hear and decode" what the preconscious is communicating. What I found was that at the preconscious level I was receiving the message that "I always fail at everything." Since emotions follow and reflect cognitions, I was feeling anxious because if I fail at everything then I would also surely fail at this (the therapy). I analyzed the thought and found that there were several distortions involved in that one thought. I understood that the cognitive distortions associated with the thought I was assessing were, essentially, proof that the thought was invalid. In performing a full thought investigation I also examined my life for evidence of lived experience, that supported or refuted the automatic thought or against the automatic thought. In this case, I found that there was very little evidence that I had a pattern of failure in my life. There had been isolated occasions like failing a class in

high school; however, that could be explained as failure by design because at that time I did not care. In assessing lived experience for success, I found that I had a very high degree of success and indeed that I often excelled at things I tried. This thought investigation opened my eyes to the value of conscious living because it brought to my attention just how devastating, and yet invalid, my preconscious perceptions could be.

If I had not performed the thought investigation at that time, I believe that due to the negative preconscious messages and negative affect, I might have, in despair, put the book down never to pick it up again. I might have consciously evaluated the situation and acknowledged that reading the book was difficult and stopped reading it. Indeed, if I did not know to evaluate the contents of the preconscious, I might have engaged in the emotional reasoning distortion. In essence, through feeling hopeless, which was underneath the anxiety I was feeling, I might have eventually assumed that the situation was in reality a hopeless cause.

Through cognitive therapy, I found that I would often attempt to solve the problem of a negative emotion -- caused by the preconscious automatic thought -- but end up going in the wrong direction in terms of solving the problem. An example of how the lack of preconscious awareness can make one unable to properly address an emotional issue occurred for me at a point in time when I had slowed in my diligence in maintaining the cognitive regimen. My erroneous contention was that I did not need to perform the cognitive protocol anymore; therefore, I had not self-monitored or performed a thought investigation in several weeks. During the slacking period, I was working for a factory that was in the process of cutting back on jobs, leaving me in the position of having to bump a coworker at

another factory to keep employed. Under these circumstances, I found that I was experiencing an extraordinary amount of guilt.

For approximately one week, I was plagued by this heavy guilt and tried to cope by being “rational”: “I have many more years of experience than her; the casual employee I’m bumping was only filling in until someone with appropriate qualifications replaced her; she has less than one year experience; I have specialized training...” Try as I might, the rationalizing was ineffective in ameliorating the guilt I felt because, as I found out later that week, I was not aware of the message my preconscious was conveying, thus addressing the wrong issue. One evening, fed up with my guilty turmoil, I put an end to my laziness and performed a thought investigation. To my astonishment, I found out that the automatic message my preconscious was communicating was that I was “going to fail at the new factory.” In essence, the guilt that plagued me had very little association to bumping my coworker but, rather, the guilt was largely about not being good enough to succeed at the new factory. Consequently, through identifying the cognitive distortions and assessing lived experience, my guilt and fear of failing were vanquished. Through “proving” to myself that the preconscious thought was invalid I was able to reduce the guilt I felt and replace the preconscious thought with a more adaptive one, should it come up again. This experience allowed me to understand the utility of conscious information processing in terms of enhancing self-awareness, problem solving capacity, and living rationally.

Overall, through practicing conscious processing there was a gradual shift in my experience of both self and world. I started to realize, in what I would describe as a definitive and empirical fashion, that I was not the monster that I thought I was. Therefore, I became more comfortable with who I was, both when I was alone, and when I was with

others. Furthermore, as I started to realize that life was not the hell that I had conceptualized it to be, I started to experience more ease and grace in living life. Importantly, positive experiences that came about by the cognitive protocol began with positive affect that lasted minutes, and came at the cost of frequent thought investigations. The positive affect gradually extended from lasting minutes to hours, and so on with less need to perform thought investigations on a frequent basis. The adaptive effects of conscious processing continued to build upon each success, until I had constructed an adaptive reality that was the foundation for the experiences described within stories four and five.

Analysis of Final Stories

Evident within story four, where I am nineteen and managing a fitness centre, is the absence of the depressive aspects of the cognitive triad that was seen in my cognition in previous stories. The first aspect of the cognitive triad associated with depression is the cognitive pattern of viewing oneself as useless, defective, and lacking any ability required to attain happiness or success (Beck 1967). Within story four, it is clear that this cognitive pattern is almost non-existent. The openly evident joy, pleasure, and pride that I displayed in both self and social aspects are all profound evidence of overcoming the first aspect of the depressive cognitive triad. The second component of the cognitive triad involves the component of depression where the individual appears unable to alter their tendency to make negative interpretations (Beck, 1967). This too has clearly been transcended as evidenced by the optimistic style of interpreting I employed as I engaged life throughout the story. The final component of the cognitive triad is the propensity to anticipate horrible consequences and insurmountable obstacles in the future (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). The final triad component of an all-encompassing pessimistic outlook about the future is also evidently

transcended. Indeed the story ends with a statement that I make which is implying wonder, acceptance, and anticipation of the future and its challenges.

At this very broad level of analysis, it is clear that the cognitive therapy has been successful in altering my schematic contents, from depressive to adaptive, and changing my thinking style to one that is based on utility and validity of thought and belief. I took responsibility for my information processing through choosing to engage in conscious “meaning making” through the cognitive method, rather than relying on the flawed interpretations of the primitive preconscious to determine the meaning of my existence.

Through relative mastery over my automatic thoughts, and consequent shifts to a conscious style of processing, it is quite clear in the fourth story that some of the very dysfunctional intermediate beliefs I had subscribed in the previous stories are greatly changed. The issues of changing intermediate beliefs are of great importance to cognitive therapy because if these are changed then it is less likely an individual will relapse into depression. In my case, the immersion in wisdom traditions and philosophy allowed me to have an advanced understanding of the information-processing concept that we as humans respond to internal representations of phenomena rather than the phenomenon in and of itself. I remember feeling empowered understanding of this because it meant that my very painful intermediate and core beliefs were nothing more than social fabrications.

In my opinion, within story four, the dysfunctional intermediate beliefs are either fully cognitively restructured, in other words have been replaced by a positive belief or, at a minimum, the dysfunctional beliefs are at a stage where they are much less likely to be evoked or triggered by any given stimulus, especially compared to the previous story. The reason why the negative beliefs are less likely to be evoked is that the negative beliefs are not

being activated, or more simply, the negative beliefs are not being used (Clark et al., 1999). For instance, the *conditional rule* (intermediate belief) that was strongly in operation in the previous story was, “If I stay angry and resentful then I won’t get hurt.” In this story however, through conscious operations, the dominant conditional rule has changed to a much more adaptive intermediate belief akin to, “If I am positive and friendly then people will respond in kind”. Essentially, through my conscious management of automatic thoughts and intermediate beliefs, the dysfunctional belief was avoided and the adaptive one was purposefully employed. Consequently, this strategy has led to the condition where the adaptive belief has been strengthened and also has become dominant, while the dysfunctional and inaccurate intermediate belief has been weakened and diminished.

At the level of core beliefs, it is quite clear in this story that my core beliefs, which take the longest to cognitively restructure, are still an influential factor. This influence of the negative core beliefs is implied within the story as I am musing how I am still a long way from fully transcending the trauma of my past. The implication of that statement within the story is that there are times where I still keenly feel and have to battle against feelings of unlovability and hopelessness brought about by the deeply entrenched core beliefs. Although this ongoing struggle with the core beliefs is not overtly documented in the story, the core beliefs still have a hold at that point in time. Nonetheless, there is also clear evidence that the restructuring of the core beliefs is indeed in process. The point in the story where I am meditating by the river, in my opinion, is the beginning of healing the core beliefs that I carried about myself in relation to God. Up to that point in the story, I believed, more so at the preconscious level, that God was petty, vengeful, evil, and unjust; however, if I reduce those to their core components I see the two depressive core beliefs: unlovability and

helplessness in relationship to God. Consequently, the experience at the river initiated a new relationship with God; one that slowly evolved as entrenched cognitive schemata inevitably changed through conscious information processing.

As outlined previously, schemata are enduring internal structures that organize and guide behavior. Major change is evident in my schemas in the fourth story. In the previous stories, my schemas were organizing and guiding my behavior to be unhappy, antisocial, and self-rejecting, in contrast to the present story. Consequently, from the cognitive perspective, I had shifted from depression, where I would screen out positive and neutral information while focusing only on negative information thereby making only negative interpretations, to consciously choosing to focus on adaptive information leading to the construction of adaptive perceptions (Beck et al., 1979). Indeed, within this story it is very much evident that the therapeutic effects of cognitive therapy have facilitated the development of learned optimism and the reacquisition of real pleasure and joy, not experienced since early childhood. Further evidence of changed schemata is that within the story I had clearly deactivated my hypervalent depressive schemata. A depressive schema is activated by general stimuli and is extremely resistant to deactivation, thus facilitating the experience of a bleak and dismal reality. Perhaps the strongest evidence of deactivation of the hypervalent schema within the fourth story comes from how I can think about my depression and trauma and not fall into a depressive mood. Theoretically speaking, if the hypervalent depressive schema still existed, the process of my reflections during my walk would presumably have been much different. For instance, in all probability if I had a depressive schema, I would have started feeling like a failure and a victim, rather than having a sense of achievement and victory as is displayed in the story. In summary, cognitive therapy had allowed me to shift from an extremely

maladaptive and dangerous way of living to an adaptive and pleasurable existence. It is clear that conscious cognitive processes are powerful operations that have the ability to alter an individual's experience of life.

Story five serves to demonstrate that the cognitive changes that are present in story four remain stable; however, the cognitive changes are enhanced, expanded, and strengthened from years of practice in conscious processing. In my case, within this period of my life, commitment to cognitive therapy was key to preventing relapse. According to cognitive theory the difference between a depressed person and a non-depressed person is that a non-depressed individual has a self-corrective mechanism regarding negative automatic thoughts of the preconscious. The self-corrective mechanism diminishes the negative affect of the negative automatic thoughts and protects individuals from the development of significantly influential maladaptive beliefs. For me, commitment to employing the cognitive strategies was mandatory to prevent relapse because even after many years of thought monitoring, I have never encountered evidence of a corrective mechanism within my own preconscious. For me, this means that cognitive therapy is for life, especially when I consider the particularly negative beliefs that I developed as a child.

Another important component that is evident within this story as well as in story four, is that I still subscribe to some very strong spiritual beliefs. As evidenced by the stories, I always have subscribed to some type of spiritual belief or another. Some individuals would argue that my engaging in spirituality is counter-productive because there is no evidence for "God" or "higher power" or spiritual realm for that matter. Nevertheless, within cognitive theory and cognitive therapy what is important is the adaptability of a thought or belief, thus adaptability takes precedence over veracity. Clearly, in story five there is no evidence if I

truly go to “The Void” or if there is a “Void” (see story five) when I meditate, and there is no evidence that anything has a purpose outside of the purpose I create through my personal information processing. Nevertheless, within the story, my spiritual beliefs greatly helped me find meaning, purpose, comfort, and security during my bout with cancer, and are thus clearly desirable cognitive components.

On another level of analysis, the spiritual orientation that I hold in the first three stories sprout from themes of persecution, forsakenness, and injustice, and are in stark contrast to the beliefs in story four and five centered on themes of unity, love, and equality. From the cognitive perspective, there is clear evidence that there has been serious cognitive restructuring of intermediate beliefs and core beliefs pertaining to the spiritual domain. In particular, within story five it is clear that my negative core beliefs have been cognitively restructured because throughout my experience with cancer there are no thoughts or beliefs relating to victimization or persecution. There is no evidence that I carry any beliefs that I somehow deserve to have cancer or that I am being punished via cancer, which in my opinion, is how I would have perceived the situation prior to the adaptive cognitive restructuring. Furthermore, within story five there is no evidence that I feel unlovable or helpless (although I am afraid at times) during my bout with cancer. The absence of feeling helpless or unlovable is perhaps the strongest evidence that many of my core beliefs are cognitively restructured, meaning that the beliefs that I now hold are that I am loveable and potent as a human being. This is compelling evidence because a diagnosis of cancer obviously affects any person to the core; I suggest that any underlying beliefs of being unlovable and especially helplessness would have been activated. Schematically speaking, it is the strength of my adaptive beliefs, in addition to maintaining conscious processing (i.e.

adherence to cognitive protocols) that prevents relapse into depressive thinking even when having to face the realities of being diagnosed with cancer.

Summary

The five autobiographical stories have been analyzed from the cognitive perspective and present my best account of what may have occurred for me at the level of cognitive process. The analysis highlights how as a child I had particular experiences that, along with preconscious dominant information processing, created a unique and idiosyncratic reality. I perceived the unique reality that I created as entirely negative due to negative experiences that were compounded by negative preconscious processing. In time, the preconscious processing facilitated the expansion and maintenance of the depressive reality in part through illusions and through preventing effective coping and problem solving. Ultimately, however, through becoming educated on information processing and cognitive therapy I was able take full advantage of the promise that cognitive therapy offers. Through obtaining the information needed to manage my cognitive components, I was able to do much more than simply overcome my depressive thinking. It is my opinion that cognitive therapy was essential to opening me to my higher potentials through allowing me freedom from being imprisoned in a constructed hellish illusion.

Conclusion

This project is my attempt to create and share something that is meaningful, personal, and reflective of our shared humanity, despite the fact this document is an academic pursuit. Overall, I believe that I have succeeded in my efforts in that this document encompasses my stated goals. Through the auto-ethnography component, as the author of the telling of my story, I am committed to my academic agenda but also enter the realm of

the meaningful and personal. Further, this project is reflective of our shared humanity on many levels, including, but not limited to cognitive process, the experience of victimization, the inevitable issue of mortality, and overcoming adversity.

As a counselor, working directly and in depth with the personal and emotional I have found the personal component sorely lacking within academic literature. As a result, I provide the auto-ethnographic component as the ideal platform because it combines the personal with the scholarly and is a means towards blurring the illusionary division between scholarly and personal/evocative writing (Burnier, 2006). The auto-ethnographic and theory components together incorporate my vulnerabilities and emotions, and models for other individuals to know how to live and cope. This auto-ethnography, like other auto-ethnographies, has a way of examining how human experience is endowed with meaning. However, the effect of examining how human experience is endowed with meaning is taken to a new level when presented in conjunction with cognitive theory.

Future autoethnographic research could include the examination of autoethnographic stories through the lens of other psychological theories as this could enhance the autoethnographic quality of helping individuals know how to live and cope. Autoethnography has the effect of examining how human experience is endowed with meaning, therefore examination from a theoretical standpoint serves as a solid foundation from which to expand on initial interpretations from ethnography alone. Furthermore, the autoethnographic quality of immersion within the data results in multidimensional experience of the data (Bochner and Ellis, 1996), and thus, future research could look at multidimensional analysis including cognitive, moral, and developmental dimensions.

The overarching purpose of this work is to entice individuals to engage cognitive theory and therapy, through this personal and academic form of exposure to cognitive therapy. It is my experience that individuals often shy away from cognitive therapy because of its complex aspects, so it is my hope that this very personal and concrete description of cognitive theory will inspire more individuals to pick up the cognitive torch. Ultimately, exposing myself in such a way is a "shout out" to people that we are not what happens to us nor are we our behaviors. As such, we are not victims of the past or present but rather creative beings capable of constructing the life we want; even with the inevitable bumps and even tragedy that we encounter on the road of life. Ultimately, this work is my movement to take responsibility for who I am as a creative being by helping others to discover, through this work, that they are also creative beings with autonomy over the experiences they cognitively construct. Perhaps, the overarching message I want to convey is that we as individuals, when informed, have the power to choose to consciously construct our worth, truth, and reality, autonomously and independent of the situations that life has dealt.

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Appendix 1

Adapted from David Burns: The Feeling Good Handbook

List of Cognitive Distortions

- 1) All-or-nothing thinking - Thinking of things in absolute terms. For instance, seeing things as either totally black (horrible) or totally white (perfect) and not seeing the shades of grey that pervades most aspects of life. An example of the black end of this distortion is when an individual gets a flat tire before work and thus claims that "life is hell".
- 2) Overgeneralization - Thinking that takes an isolated event and makes making generalizations from that event. For instance, failing your first driving test means that you will never get your license.
- 3) Mental filter - Thinking that focuses only on negative information while ignoring neutral and positive information. For instance, considering that you are a terrible runner because you came in third in a race.
- 4) Disqualifying the positive - Thinking that turns positive situations into a negative situation through rationalization. For instance, thinking that your family which loves you does not make you loveable because your family is supposed to love you.
- 5) Jumping to conclusions - Making negative inferences without any evidence to support your assumptions.
 - A) Mind reading - Thinking that entails assuming you know what someone else is thinking. For instance, thinking the clerk serving you hates you when in reality she is really stressed.
 - B) Fortune telling - Making negative predictions without any evidence. For instance, thinking that your committed and supportive spouse is bound to someday leave you.
- 6) Magnification and Minimization - Thinking that entails inappropriately understating or exaggerating the way situations truly are.
 - A) Magnification and Minimization often this takes form as a "double standard" where the positive characteristics of other people are exaggerated while your negative characteristics are magnified and vice versa. For instance, thinking that your friend passed the test because she is a genius while you passed only through luck alone. Alternatively, thinking that your friend missing the basketball shot was a fluke but you missing the same shot makes you a loser.
 - B) Catastrophizing - Thinking that entails "making a mountain out of a mole hill". For instance, thinking that a flat tire on the way to work means "life is hell".
- 7) Emotional reasoning - Thinking that entails drawing conclusions about a situation based on how one is feeling emotionally, rather than drawing conclusions from objective evidence. For instance, thinking that life is hopeless because you are feeling hopeless, which is a gross lapse in logic.

8) Making should statements - Thinking that entails the use of "must", "should", or "ought" thus creating one of two situations a) turning the way things actually are into a negative situation b) creation of rigid rules that are inappropriate, yet insisting they always apply no matter what the situation is.

9) Labeling and Mislabeling - Thinking that is emotionally loaded and entails inappropriately categorizing individuals or events, merely by naming them. This cognitive distortion makes a changeable situation into a permanent and unchangeable flaw. For instance, thinking that being turned down for a date means that you are a loser, thus the cause of the turndown becomes clear, and it is the fact that you are a loser (which is a horrible and unchangeable label to carry). Rather than labeling, a person could find other causes for the turndown that are more realistic and appropriate. Thus, the person can view the problem through looking at changing behavior. Strategies such as looking for a person who is more compatible, change his/her wardrobe, seek better social skills, improving on personal hygiene are all very changeable and achievable variables that will facilitate finding a date.

10) Personalization - Thinking that entails applying inappropriate blame to self or others regarding a negative situation. For instance, thinking that the small business you work for went out of business because you work there, ignores the issue of the Wal-Mart that came to town a few months ago.