Practising Life Writing:

Teaching Through Vulnerability, Discomfort, Mindfulness, and Compassion

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

the University of Manitoba

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Education

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I engage in life writing and literary métissage (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009) to explore and exemplify mindful, aesthetic, and compassionate practices for working through moments of crisis (Kumashiro, 2010) in teaching and learning. The dissertation is designed as a four-strand braid and organized around the active verb "practising" to dig deep into the dynamic, and often difficult, processes of teaching and learning: (1) Practising Vulnerability; (2) Practising Discomfort; (3) Practising Mindfulness; and (4) Practising Compassion. Each strand is composed of different genres of life writing: theoretical and analytical introductions, letter writing, journal pieces, comics, photos, poetry, creative non-fiction, collages, scenes from a play, and an alphabet book. The multimodal life writing pieces are worked examples (Gee, 2010) of contemplative practices and pedagogical praxis.

Life writing offers concrete ways to practise mindfulness, reflection, and reflexivity, which, in turn, invite a more awakened, critical, and compassionate stance as an educator. If teachers want to move beyond simply promoting the importance of reflective practice, wellbeing, self-actualization, and compassion to their students then we need to show more teachers (and teacher educators) the messy process of doing so themselves. Reading life writing is a starting point for teachers at all stages in their careers to imagine how they could, or already do, engage in similar processes and invite them to cultivate compassion and self-compassion as a grounding stance for their life projects as teachers, learners, and human beings.

My autoethnographic teacher inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) was prompted when I encountered "troubling" (Kumashiro, 2009) tensions when first teaching about

homophobia and transphobia to teacher education students at a faculty of education on the Canadian prairies. I began to explore the vulnerability and discomfort of this teaching moment from an experimental (Davies, 2011), multimodal (Kress & Street, 2006; Pahl & Roswell, 2006), critical literacy stance (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). My inquiry shifted after a diagnosis of breast cancer, which became an opportunity for me to awaken to more mindful, empathetic, and compassionate ways of being, living, teaching, and researching.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude is infinite for all the support that has been offered to me in the development of this dissertation. I could not be more proud to be part of the lively, loving, and laughing community of critical and compassionate friends known as the "Transformative Teaching, Learning, and Leading" cohort. My most sincere and humble thanks to Cathy, Danielle, Lark, Margaret, Mike, Natalie, and Pam. I give special thanks to Lark who has been my lifeline through the messy writing process of the dissertation. I am deeply grateful for the teachers of my doctoral courses who introduced me to new ideas and ways of expressing myself. I am also deeply indebted to Dr. Michelle Honeyford for her mentorship in my teaching and research journey.

I am truly fortunate to have had an advisor and advisory committee who have not only inspired me to become a better researcher, writer, and scholar, but who also continually show me living examples of how I want to be as teacher, learner, and human being. My advisor, Dr. Wayne Serebrin, has transformed how I teach, learn, and re-search. The rest of my advisory committee is also a dream. Dr. Deborah Schnitzer, Dr. Fiona Green, Dr. Warren Cariou invited me to play with ideas, embrace the motion of process, and push the boundaries of my own comfort levels and academic conventions. Our meetings have been joy-filled whirlwinds of ideas, suggestions, questions, and support. I leave dizzy and delighted. Thank you. Thanks also to the generous time and critical thinking of my external examiner, Dr. Carl Leggo—this dissertation is better because of your close and compassionate reading.

My doctoral research has been possible through the generous support of the University of Manitoba Graduate Fellowship, the Manitoba Graduate Scholarship, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Doctoral Fellowship.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is a love story. It is a love story about teaching and learning; writing and reflecting; resiliency and courage. It is a story authored from the love I have received from so many throughout my life.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and the friends who have become my family. A deep thank you to my parents Ina and Leif Nielsen for supporting my love of reading and writing from an early age and for being there for me through many life journeys. I am extremely grateful that my sister also happens to be my best friend—many thanks to Heather for making me laugh harder, be funnier, and for "getting" everything I go through. Thanks also for bringing us Scott, Kendall, and Gavin who enrich our lives. Thanks to my other parents who have loved and supported me for more than half my life: Linda Watt and Doug Settle and Don Watt and Cindi Reopell. Thanks to my other sister Erin, her husband Mat, and their lovely boys William and Oliver. You have all been instrumental in caring for my family and encouraging me at every stage. Thanks to my wonderful network of friends who have walked and talked with me, fed our family, cared for my children, and reminded me of what really matters most in life.

Most of all this dissertation is dedicated to the three great loves of my life: To my beautiful daughter Else who reminds me every day about the writer and social justice advocate I would like to be; To my sweet-hearted son Sebastien who teaches me about kindness, gentleness, and pure joy; And to my David who helps me be my best self in every possible way. I am so proud of each of you and so grateful to be sharing my life story with all of you. I love you all more than I can possibly say.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL FOR WHICH PERMISSION WAS OBTAINED

The following pages are evidence that John J. Guiney Yallop has given me permission to use three of his poems in this dissertation. As he requested, I would like to acknowledge that the poems used in this dissertation have been previously published in the following publications:

Guiney Yallop, J. J. (2008). *OUT of place: A poetic journey through the emotional landscape of a gay person's identities within/without communities.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. The University of Western Ontario, London.

Guiney Yallop, J. J. (2010a). Through the words of a poet: Experiencing a writing journey. *LEARNing landscapes, 4*(1), pp. 189-209.

Guiney Yallop, J. J. (2010b). *Of place and memory: A poetic journey.* Big Tancok Island, NS: Backalong Books.

CHAPTER 1
An Invitation to Life Writing and Life Reading

Kabir tells us, "Wherever you are is the entry point," and this is always true with writing. Wherever you are is always the right place. There is never a need to fix anything, to hitch up the bootstraps of the soul and start at some higher place. Start right where you are.
(Cameron, 1998, pp. 4-5)

Beginners come to new experiences not knowing so much and therefore open. The openness is creative. It is an innate characteristic of the mind. The trick is never to lose it. That would require that you stay in the ever-emerging wonder of the present moment.
(Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p. 9)

But then I think of how much beginnings have to do with freedom, how much disruption has to do with consciousness and the awareness of possibility that has so much to do with teaching other human beings. And I think that if I and other teachers truly want to provoke our students to break through the limits of the conventional and the taken for granted, we ourselves have to experience breaks with what has been established in our own lives; we have to keep arousing ourselves to begin again.
(Greene, 1995, p. 108)

With all the messy stuff, no matter how messy it is, just start where you are—not tomorrow, not later, not yesterday when you were feeling better—but now. Start now, just as you are.
(Chodron, 2003, p. 90)

With All the Messy Stuff

When I invite myself just to start where I am, especially here with all the messy stuff of life writing, I feel compelled to confess. I admit that this inquiry, now storied and braided into the dissertation before you, has taken me to rather unplanned and unexpected places. I have (un)willingly wandered into and through places of vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness, and compassion, and I have been transformed by these wanderings and the wonderings about the "complicated conversations about curriculum" (Pinar, 2000) they provoked. Yet with humility, I acknowledge that this is certainly not the dissertation I proposed when I first began my doctoral studies. Instead, I am engaging in "accidental" research. I first crashed into this course of self-study, professional reflection, and multiple ways of telling difficult teaching and learning stories several years ago. My crash began when I encountered "troubling" (Kumashiro, 2009) tensions when I first chose to teach about homophobia and transphobia to teacher education students at a faculty of education on the Canadian prairies. After a few years of re-orienting myself to the diverse landscapes of this new teacher inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), cancer crashed into me. In September 2013, just when I thought I had cleared my autumn to complete my dissertation, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. My life was put on, what I fondly called, a Divine Pause. I took an official leave from my teaching and my research. With intentional discipline, I left my dissertation for a full year to focus on the process of resiliency and recovery for my family and myself. When I returned to my studies, I knew there had been a profound shift in me, and therefore, there needed to be a corresponding shift in my inquiry. The entry point of this dissertation starts at the generative intersection of these two crash scenes. I just start as I am, right here, grateful to be in all the messy stuff.

Now, I invite you, the reader, to start right where you are—even if that means starting with an uncertainty or discomfort about whether you are ready to be addressed so directly or connected so intimately to this experience. Ready or not, I extend this invitation because this dissertation is grounded in the theoretical, curricular, pedagogical, aesthetic, political, and personal stances of *life writing*, and consequently *life reading.* Canadian curriculum scholars Cynthia Chambers, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Carl Leggo, and Anita Sinner (2012) explain that life writing is a "mode of education inquiry, one where educators and learners may get to the 'heart of wisdom' as they struggle with the tensions and complexities of learning and teaching, in challenging contemporary circumstances and in a variety of pedagogical locations" (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xix). They particularly call "for life writing that addresses questions such as: *What moments of learning/teaching have changed your life? What stories need to be told? What questions need to be asked?"* (Chambers et al., p. xxi, italics in the original). By its purpose and design, life writing, which is considered "both a way of knowing and being" (Chambers et al., xx), enables and inspires empathetic inquiry:

> Empathetic inquiry is enthusiastically focused on the etymology of empathy as rooted in emotion, passion, imagination, sympathy, and vicarious identification. By writing about our experiences, often in vulnerable, confessional, personal ways, we are creating spaces for others to join us in conversation about their vulnerable and personal stories. (Chambers et al., p. xxvi)

As Brené Brown (2012) argues, "Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering" (p. 8). By mindfully creating spaces for empathetic inquiry about teaching and learning, for the

telling of and listening to the stories that matter most to us, we create opportunities for authentic connection with ourselves and with others.

In this dissertation I engage in life writing and literary métissage (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009) to explore and exemplify mindful, aesthetic, and compassionate practices for working through moments of crisis (Kumashiro, 2010) in teaching and learning. The dissertation is designed as a four-strand braid and organized around the active verb "practising" to dig deep into the dynamic, and often difficult, processes of teaching and learning: (1) Practising Vulnerability; (2) Practising Discomfort; (3) Practising Mindfulness; and (4) Practising Compassion. Each strand is composed of different genres of life writing: theoretical and analytical introductions, letter writing, journal pieces, comics, photos, poetry, creative non-fiction, collages, scenes from a play, and an alphabet book. The multimodal life writing pieces are worked examples (Gee, 2010) of contemplative practices and pedagogical praxis.

Life writing offers concrete ways to practise mindfulness, reflection, and reflexivity, which, in turn invites a more awakened, critical, and compassionate stance as an educator. If teachers want to move beyond simply promoting the importance of reflective practice, wellbeing, self-actualization, and compassion to their students then we need to show more teachers (and teacher educators) the messy process of doing so themselves. Reading life writing is a starting point for teachers at all stages in their careers to imagine how they could, or already do, engage in similar processes and invite them to cultivate compassion and self-compassion as a grounding stance for their life projects as teachers, learners, and human beings.

I began my autoethnographic teacher inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) by exploring the vulnerability and discomfort of my first out-as-an-ally teaching moment from an experimental (Davies, 2011), multimodal (Kress & Street, 2006; Pahl & Roswell, 2006), critical literacy stance (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). My inquiry shifted after a diagnosis of breast cancer, which became an opportunity for me to awaken to more mindful, empathetic, and compassionate ways of being, living, teaching, and researching.

We All Have Messy Stuff

As human beings we are all learners, we are all teachers, and we are all storytellers. We are connected because we all have messy stuff. We have all crashed and experienced crisis. And we have all experienced recovery, discovered resiliency, and sought transformation. Teachers powerfully contribute to the field of education when they tell their messy crash stories for the purposes of exploring, learning from, and connecting with others though their processes of recovery, resiliency, and transformation. These dynamic stories value the process of change and challenge a "*fixed-performance frame"* (Johnston, 2012, p. 11, italics in original) that is often held by teachers, learners, and educational decision-makers (whether it is curriculum makers, resource developers, policy makers, teacher educators, etc.). A fixed performance frame is characterized by the belief that people "have fixed traits, such as smartness, intelligence, and personality, that they cannot change" (p. 17). These traits are made visible by the learner's, or teacher's, performance at various set tasks: if the learner/teacher succeeds at the task, s/he is considered smart or competent in that area (p. 17). Yet Johnston (2012) warns about what happens when people who adopt this fixed frame experience failure, or difficulty:

> Having taken up the fixed-performance narrative, we tend to live into it, becoming the character with the fatal flaw. Not only do children who adopt a fixed-performance frame

> become helpless when they encounter failure, but when they subsequently face problems that they had previously solved, they believe they might not be able to solve them a second time. (p. 15)

Although Johnston refers specifically to children here, I believe this also applies to many teachers, teacher education students, and teacher educators who approach teaching and learning through a fixed-performance frame.

In contrast, the "*dynamic-learning frame"* (Johnston, 2012, p. 12, italics in the original) is a theory that people can and do change through learning, even though learning and change is often a slow and challenging process where mistakes frequently occur (p. 17). As Johnston argues:

> Dynamic theorists can afford to take on challenge because in their world, mistakes don't point to fixed and shameful inadequacies. In a dynamic world, when you run into difficulty it just means things are becoming more interesting. Challenging activities present no threat, only the promise of learning something new. The dynamic theory world is more interesting and less anxiety producing than the one constructed from fixed theories. (p. 12)

Johnston (2012) argues that the dynamic-learning frame has significant positive academic, social, emotional, and ethical implications for individuals and society. Some of the consequences and contributions of teaching and learning from a dynamic-learning frame include the following: understanding the mental processes that affect behaviour; taking risks and choosing challenges to further learning and teaching; utilizing and sharing strategies when challenges are encountered; synthesizing multiple perspectives; attempting to understand context and potential personal motives when faced with conflict; and staying open to avoid

judgments and stereotypes (p. 23). I theorize that most teachers, learners, and educational decisions makers are on a continuum that ranges from fixed-performance to dynamic-learning theories: in some contexts and learning encounters we may be more fixed in our approach to ourselves and others, and in other contexts we may be more dynamic. My own shifting continuum between fixed and dynamic approaches to learning is evident throughout this dissertation. I believe this dissertation contributes to the field of education because many educators value co-creating more caring and responsive learning environments, from early years to professional learning contexts whether they are in the beginning of their careers or are more experienced. Those of us committed to teaching and learning for positive individual and social change need more narrative examples of dynamic-learning and teaching that value both the crashes and the recoveries. When we see, hear, and feel lived examples from others' teaching experiences—especially messy and mistake-filled teaching—we can imagine how we will be able to bravely engage from this dynamic end of the continuum more often. So how do we move towards a dynamic-learning frame?

Sometimes a story makes the best kind of invitation to dynamic learning. Storyteller Laura Simms (2011) writes that it is "in telling stories we nourish ourselves and our world. We make light dawn in the middle of increasing darkness. It is splendid" (p. 69). It allows us to come into relationship with the teller and it offers us background so we have a better sense of the big ideas we are being offered before we commit further time or energy. In this invitational section, I tell a story, or rather a series of stories, of my research journey. Rutherford (2009) claims, "A big part of making any research accessible is to carefully set the context for the reader" (p. 31). Langer (2003) reminds me that "context depends on who we are today, who we were yesterday, and from which view we see things" (p. 38). It is from these perspectives that

the stories I tell in the rest of this chapter aim to explore the pedagogical, theoretical, ethical, and methodological context of my inquiry. I begin by returning to the teacher education context that prompted my inquiry and then tell about some of the ethical and aesthetic decisions that affected how I came to explore this teaching moment from an experimental, multimodal, critical literacy stance. I then tell about how my inquiry shifted because of the year I spent immersed in practising mindfulness for wellbeing. Buddhist ordained nun Pema Chödrön (2003) writes, "Everything in our lives has the potential to wake us up or put us to sleep. Allowing it to awaken us is up to us" (p. 34). I allowed my cancer experiences to awaken me to imagine more compassionate and empathetic ways of being, living, teaching, and researching. I explore how life writing in the form of literary métissage enables me to live the kind of inquiry where I can contribute personal and professional compassion to current complicated conversations about teaching and learning that I believe desperately need more gentleness, loving-kindness, and hope in order for healing, recovery, and transformation. In particular, I believe this dissertation contributes to the complicated and dynamic curricular conversations in four separate, yet potentially overlapping areas in the field of education: teacher education, LGBTQ* education and advocacy, wellbeing and mindfulness education, and cancer survivorship education.

Crash, Crisis, and Coming Out: Accidental Teacher Research

Whatever curricular conversations in which you most frequently participate, somehow, for some reason you have been prompted to read this dissertation. I invite you to return with me to the site that prompted my accidental research: The scene of my first out-as-an-ally teacher educator experience when I crashed into a teachable moment. Since most people have experienced some

kind of crash in their lives, I am assuming you will agree that crashing can be difficult. Crashing can be crisis. But can crashing and crisis be learning?

Exemplifying what Johnston (2012) later calls a dynamic-learning framework, Short and Burke (1991) conceptualize learning as a process of balance, disequilibrium, and re-balance:

> Learning acts to throw learners off balance. The ambiguities that learners investigate with intent are threats to their current sets of beliefs. They feel out of balance because their world view is threatened. As part of the learning process, there must be periodic attempts to regain control, to re-establish equilibrium. Learners must mentally re-gather their forces and collect themselves when they find themselves finding ideas that do not fit in with their current beliefs. (p. 27)

In the following illustration, I attempt to show a learner in an on-going spiral of learning. Important to the context of dissertation, this learner could be imagined as someone who is in a student role or as someone who is in a teacher role, since teachers are also simultaneously learners. S/he starts at equilibrium, temporarily achieving a balance in his/her worldview. Yet this is not a position of ease. Our world is always in motion in multiple directions. Short and Burke suggest that "learners' worlds are never at rest" (p. 27), so even though the learner is currently balanced, s/he is actively and dynamically negotiating forces of motion. Internal or external forces can "throw learners off balance" (p. 27). Sometimes this "knock off balance" is fleeting and the learner quickly re-establishes equilibrium. Learning has occurred, but the learner's worldview may not have shifted too substantially so recovery is easily achieved.

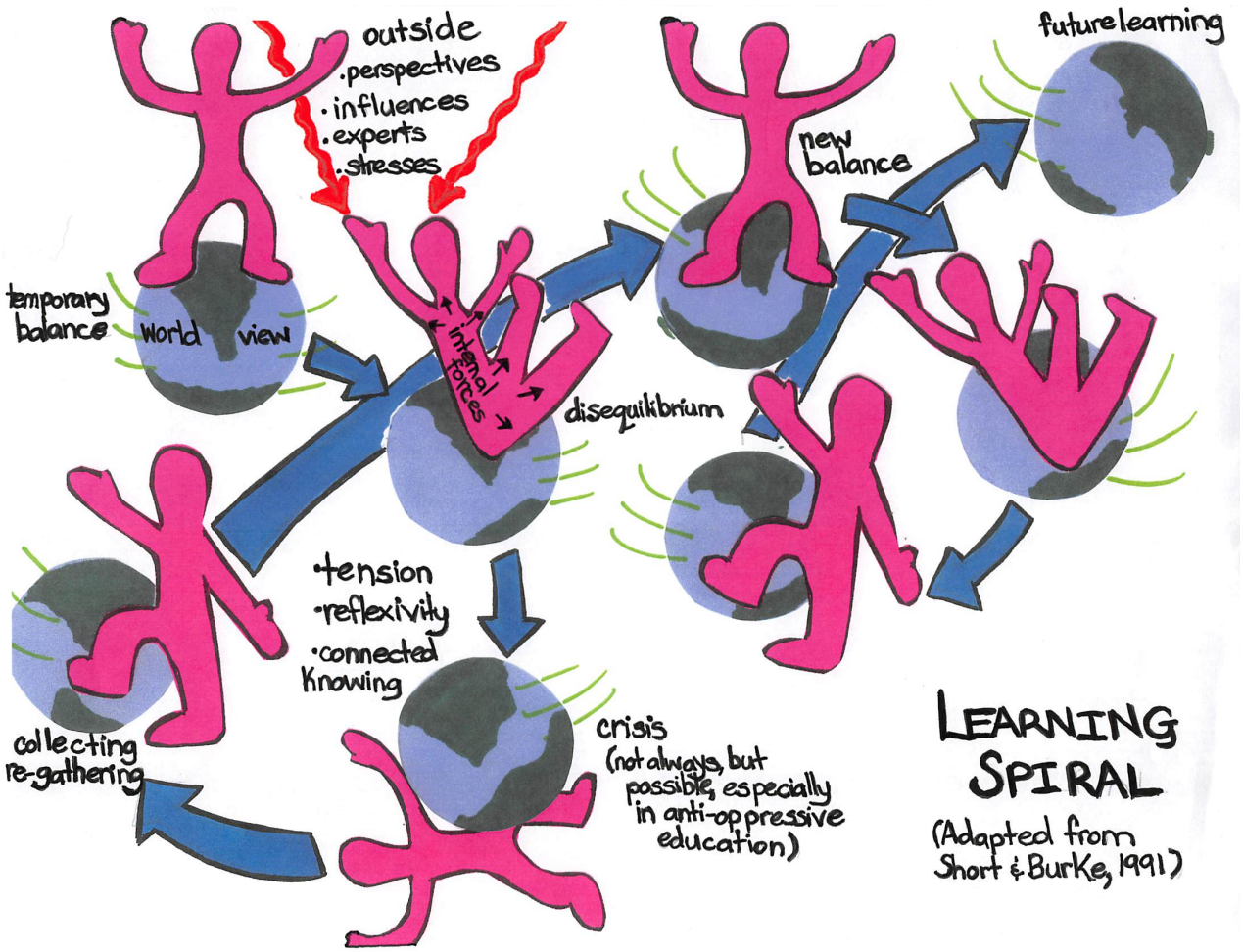


Figure 1: The Learning Spiral (Adapted from Short & Burke, 1991)

Other times, this loss of balance can feel like a crashing of one's worldview and can leave the learner feeling a sense of extreme discomfort and even crisis. Kumashiro (2010) describes *crisis* as a "state of emotional discomfort or disorientation that calls in students to make some change . . . requires some response" (p. 30). Further, he says that crisis can

sometimes be "visceral and noticeable . . . as when students express feelings of guilt or anger or in some way resist continuing with the lesson," but, at other times, Kumashiro explains that crisis can be more "subdued and subconscious as when students feel discomfort but are unable to name that feeling" (p. 30). Kumashiro argues that in whatever way crisis manifests, students "are on the verge of some shift and require the opportunity to work through their emotions and disorientations" (p. 30). When I created the illustration of the learning spiral, I showed a learner in the process of crashing down, unbalanced by his or her internal or external forces. In some cases, if learners experience a crisis, it might feel as if they have been knocked flat on their backs with their previously held worldviews rolling on top of them and pinning them with their weight. There is no set timetable to learning or recovering from a state of crisis. If a learner is unable to emerge from the crisis because the guilt or shame becomes paralyzing or the learner remains too clouded in external stresses, the experience might be described as what Dewey (1938) called "miseducative." If this is the case, we can imagine a stop sign to learning because the moment "restricts the potential of future experiences" (Short & Burke, 1991, p. 16). However, despite the many challenges, learners often do emerge from crisis in a most educative and transformative way.

I am in awe, wonder, and deep appreciation, of the courage and resiliency of teachers and learners. I want to know more about the internal and external forces, supports, processes, resources, and practices that help learners-in-crisis get back up and try to find a new balance. Short and Burke (1991) suggest, "collecting one's self becomes an aspect of the cycle that we call learning. This act of re-establishing equilibrium, of re-collecting one's self is characterized by tension, reflexivity, and connected knowing" (p. 27). Kumashiro (2010) refers to this process of learners re-collecting as "*work[ing] through* their crisis" (p. 30). Although he is

careful to assert that not all learners will work through crisis in a standardized way, Kumashiro (2010) advocates for teachers to mindfully create experiences for living with and working through crisis within the learning environment. Kumashiro (2010) asks questions that have become key to my inquiry:

> When students are in a state of crisis, teachers need to structure experiences that can help students work through it. Teachers might ask: when students confront discomforting information what activities, conversations, reading, or experiences can help them bear being uncomfortable for a while? What experiences invite them to explore the possibility of making sense of the world and of themselves in very different ways, especially ways that move toward social justice? (Kumashiro, 2010, p. 31)

As teachers, we also need to ask these questions of ourselves. Teachers have discomforting moments. We experience crisis. How do we bear being uncomfortable for a while? How do we make sense of the world and of ourselves? How do we move in very different ways toward social justice?

The process of collecting, re-gathering, and working through crisis can be undeniably painful for students and teachers alike. Yet, Kumashiro (2010) argues that this is what is needed to bring learners to new understandings:

> Learning is not a comforting process that merely repeats or affirms what students have already learned. Learning is a disarming process that raises questions about what was already learned and what is yet to be learned. Learning involves *looking beyond* what students already know, what teachers already know, and what we both are only now coming to know, not by rejecting such knowledge, but by treating it paradoxically, that is, by learning what matters in society (and how it informs my identity, relationships, and

> actions), while asking why it matters (and how it can reinforce and challenge an oppressive status quo). Such a process cannot help but to be uncomfortable (p. 32).

Even though this is an uncomfortable process, it can also be empowering: "We collect ourselves, regather our forces, make new connections, and establish a new equilibrium, a new balance of beliefs. We have control over our own connected knowing" (Short & Burke, 1991, p. 30). I do not believe this difficult, but "educative" (Dewey, 1938) process is simply a cycle that returns us to the same space we were before. I believe this process spirals us to new places, new worldviews, and new directions.

Kumashiro (2010) argues that anti-oppressive teachers, or teachers who deliberately seek moving towards social justice, begin the process when we try to address the "partial nature of our teaching" (p. 122). He claims this can happen when we, as teachers, "focus on one unit, or one lesson, or one moment of our teaching and re-think the possibilities for change within the particular social, historical, political, and pedagogical context in which it arose" (pp. 122-123). Kumashiro admits that this kind of close reading or analysis of distinct teaching encounters might "seem tedious," but he encourages the process because it is "what helps to make teaching exciting, and challenging, and liberating. Such a process is what gives me hope that anti-oppressive education is possible in my classroom" (pp. 122-123). So, here is one really short version of a moment from my learning about teaching that I have spent the last several years re-thinking through an on-going process. Some of the details in this version of the story might seem disconnected or unnecessary, but they come to play in retellings later in the dissertation.

A Short Version of the Story

It was my second year as a sessional instructor and I was teaching secondary school teacher education students a compulsory "Language and Literacy Across the Curriculum" course. I set an assignment asking my students to write stories about their experiences as teachers and/or learners. I began to hear and read stories of racism, sexism, ableism, bullying, homophobia, and hate encountered and endured in big and little schools across the prairies. In response to these stories, I decided I would teach a lesson called "Addressing the Languages of Hate: Teaching Anti-Homophobia Education to High School Teachers." I carefully planned my lesson. I included research, poetry, and a film made in Manitoba by Manitoban high school students about homophobia.

I was super nervous about this teaching, which I also viewed as activism, so I tried to calm myself down and give myself confidence by choosing just the right outfit. From the depths of my closet, I chose a flowing purple cardigan, which I hoped would symbolize my solidarity as an ally and creative flair.

I taught the class, pretty much following my plan. It went fairly well . . . some tense moments during a discussion, but I made it through most of the information I had hoped to address. I told my students to call me or email me if they needed to talk about anything. I told them I didn't want anyone feeling troubled. I did not get any anxious phone calls or emails that evening or the next day. I thought, "Phew, that wasn't so bad. I don't know why I was so scared. This ally-stuff isn't that hard."

The next class was the day before Halloween. Many of the students were in costumes and I had planned a fun "Tricks or Treats of Teaching" focus for the class, complete with candy. But there was weird energy in the room and tension so heavy I could feel it. One of the students asked if we were going to debrief the film at all in class today. I said, "Absolutely," but I noticed my hands were shaking and I felt like the room was spinning. I searched for a pen and paper so I could make notes of what I was about to hear.

We got into a talking circle, which we had done several times before in the class. I had a blue puffy fish from the dollar store that was our talking object and we began to discuss and debrief the film throwing the fish around the circle so the speaker could have the attention of the others in the room. I could see the emotion and conflict that had arisen in response to the last class and I felt that I had somehow failed in my ethic of care as a teacher. I thought I had done harm.

I began to cry. Not just a few silent tears that I blinked away gracefully. Ugly, gulping sobs at times. But we kept talking. I wrote things down so I could learn from them later when I had calmed down.

And that is one way I can tell a short version of the story.

From Intentional Teaching to Accidental Research

This would be a very different dissertation if I had decided in advance that I was going to research my teaching about anti-homophobia education with teacher education students and follow a set and systematic plan to record, analyze, and interrogate that learning. It would be very different because the ethical dilemmas and decisions, methodological choices, and ways of representing my findings would look, sound, and feel very different. It would also be very different because having any kind of set research plan in advance would have inevitably changed the teaching encounter itself. Yet as I hope the story above shows, I did not set about this teaching with my dissertation as an imagined goal.

I chose to teach about anti-homophobia education because I was beginning to attend to how both "big" and "small" stories (Bamberg, 2006; Freeman, 2006; Georgoakpoloa, 2006, 2007; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009) as well as "institutional" stories (Linde, 2009; Vincent, 2011) about homophobia and transphobia were being told in our teacher education space. Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) explain that narrative researchers often describe "big stories" as ones that emerge through formal interviews or elicited narrative accounts in which "a participant is asked to retrospect on specific life-shaping episodes or on their lives as a whole in order to connect episodes into a life story" (p. 85). When I assigned a story project where students could explore their teaching and learning experiences, I ended up eliciting a few "big stories" about homophobia. In contrast to "big stories," Phoenix and Sparkes (2009) describe "small stories" as "stories told during interaction, generally within everyday settings, about very mundane things and everyday occurrences" (p. 86). The "small stories" I was hearing in my classroom were just snippets of language—a phrase here or there, conscious or unconscious that told of how homophobia seemed to be a permanent, yet almost invisible fixture in our provincial schools. For example, I would

hear a teacher education student say that s/he believed his/her students would think learning about reading strategies (or something else) would be "gay," or how s/he would often hear his/her students call each other "fags" or "dykes" in classrooms or hallways and not know how to respond. Inviting students to tell their "big" and "small" stories through life writing and dialogue became a strategy to attend to "institutional" stories in a new ways.

Vincent (2011) argues that, "institutions use narratives to remember the past as well as imagine a future for themselves" (p. 2). Linde (2009) suggests that often people within institutions "shape their stories to harmonise with the events and values of main institutional values" (p. 4). The "institutional" stories I was beginning to recognize came more from how I noticed what stories were officially being told or left untold through program and curriculum choices in the faculty of education. Although I believe the institutional stories are now changing in alignment with a world-wide shift to more open conversations about LGBTQ*[1] rights, at that time our pre-service teacher education program offered several "School and Society" classes in which issues such as genders, sexualities, homophobia, and bullying *might* be covered—often through student-selected presentations. There might also be attention given to any of these particular issues in any course, but that would be left to the discretion of the individual instructors. Because of these "big," "small," and "institutional" narratives swirling around me, I decided to directly teach about homophobia and transphobia.

The context of this "accidental research" is also greatly influenced by the timing of the teaching encounter in my doctoral program. The classes that prompted my inquiry occurred during a specific time of transition for me. My students' term was near to ending and I was

[1] I have chosen to use the acronym LGBTQ* throughout this dissertation to represent Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Two-Spirit, Queer, Questioning, and those who choose other ways to identify their own gender or sexuality.

moving out of my teacher educator role and into an intense academic focus with my doctoral candidacy exams beginning just a few days later. Goswami et al. (2009) suggest it is important when developing an inquiry paradigm to consider what Emig called the "governing gaze," which determines "how and why . . . we see and perceive what we see" (Goswami et al., p. 6). In retrospect, I can see how my gaze was most certainly governed by the integrated lenses of my candidacy exam questions and all I had been reading to prepare for the exam. As I explain in the "prelude" section to my candidacy exam:

> I begin to tell, through autoethnography, a very recent encounter teaching anti-homophobic education to high school teacher candidates. I do this as part of the prelude because I believe this story informs my writing (and potentially your reading) of all three candidacy questions: it is a story that illustrates my understanding of transformative teaching and learning [Question One], strengthens my belief in the need to teach about genders and education [Question Two], and provides an example of how I indulge in autoethnography in my quest to become a more deeply aware educator [Question Three]. (Watt, Candidacy Exam, 2011-2012)

These questions were created for me because I have long been intrigued by what makes teaching and learning transformative, how gender and sexuality constructions and performances affect our learning, and how autoethnography (the study of writing about self within culture) might be a particularly reflexive methodology for the kind of research I was hoping to pursue. When I decided to write about my teaching encounter, I did so with a very specific audience (my advisory committee) and form (candidacy exam) in mind. Therefore, I consciously chose to write my story as an autoethnography of a novice teacher educator.

A Place of Great Passion

Although I have just confessed that I did not enter into this teaching encounter with a pre-determined goal or even an intuitive inclination that it would become my doctoral dissertation, I acknowledge that I try to come to as much of my teaching as I can with inquiry as my stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Rutherford (2009) writes:

> It is perhaps a universal characteristic of teacher research that the motivation to do it in the first place comes from a great passion and a desire to examine and reflect on one's own teaching in order to improve. In doing teacher research, one takes a personal inventory of one's classroom and the practices enacted there. (p. 14)

Filled with a great passion to improve my teaching, I begin from the assumption that I continually need to learn. I admit that there are some days I learn more than others, and usually the days when I am learning the most are the ones when my teaching does not go as I anticipated. I will also admit that I often have a tendency to think of these less predictable days from the "fixed-performance" (Johnston, 2012) end of the spectrum, considering them the "bad days", where I feel as if my lesson or if I, as a teacher, have, somehow "failed". I think this self-deprecating tendency comes from my internalized images of successful teachers and ideal classrooms—images I have absorbed from my experiences as a student and now as a parent of school-aged children, from my perceptions of "good" and "bad" teacher-characters in books or on television and movies, and especially through my formal and informal professional learning as a pre- and in-service teacher. I have been trained to consider how to "manage" and "control" classrooms and how to plan lessons that anticipate each and every need of my individual students while trying to ensure that they achieve the provincially required general and specific curricular learning outcomes, all the while fitting my activities and interactions into exactly the

time allotted for the class period. I believe there is a pretty dominant cultural myth that "good" teaching is hygienic, controlled, and follows a predictable plan.

Granger (2011) writes powerfully about these myths, tensions, and silences in educational contexts that adhere to the "fixed-performance frame" theory (Johnston, 2012):

> Teaching and learning, within an institution peopled by diverse individuals and beset by multiple demands and worries (from the pedagogical to the philosophical, the economic to the ethical, the political to the logistic to the technical), can be an intricate and opaque affair. These concerns imply multiple vantage points that are not unfamiliar to educators. Yet despite theorists' efforts to highlight these various preoccupations, much of current Western education, from curriculum documents to classroom practices, from preschools to universities and even to teacher preparation programs, persists in conducting itself as if such difficult moments were unheard of, progress and success were certain and unequivocal, and the uniform linear development of a homogeneous generation of learners were guaranteed—or, at the very least, that any detours along that presumed straight road of development were predictable, and could be either pre-empted or easily remedied by use of the correct strategy. (p. 11)

Yet Granger continues by describing what most people who have spent even a small amount of time in schools know from experience:

> Education does not proceed in a straight line. Though we may be forgiven for wishing that it did, or imagining or pretending that it does, if we visit a classroom even briefly, converse with a teacher struggling with a new curriculum, or recall moments when our own teaching was sidetracked by theoretical, technological, or personal vicissitudes, we

> are compelled to recognize that our wish is probably futile, our pretence likely in vain. (p. 12)

Authentic teaching and learning in everyday, embedded contexts is most often like what I have been conditioned to think of as "failure": messy, unpredictable, and dynamic.

Messy, unpredictable, and dynamic moments in a classroom can be stressful for a teacher. During times of stress, it can be difficult to make sense of information and fully attend to the potential learning opportunities that are unfolding. Teachers may be very aware that they are part of a great moment of learning, but do not have the distance or perspective yet to see it or make meaning from it. Many times during my teaching career, even long before my cancer experience, I reminded myself about advice I had heard was given to patients who are about to receive a significant health diagnosis. I had heard (and have now experienced for myself) that patients are advised to bring someone else or make a digital recording when they receive news from their doctor. The stress and shock of hearing about the health crisis can make it very difficult for patients to hear all the information being told to them, including important information about treatments and next steps. If another person is also listening or a digital recorder captures the moment, then patients can go through the information at another calmer, more focused time to glean what they need or borrow from an intentional other's perspective. During my messy and unpredictable life teaching, this advice of finding a way to record the moment for later analysis has seemed appropriate at moments when I can sense significant learning is about to take place for myself or for the community of learners. I do not usually carry a digital recording device or have a significant other who can regularly listen to the unfolding events in my classroom, but I do often take notes during class discussions or write in

a journal following the class, just as I did on the day when my students wanted to debrief the film and the lesson on homophobia.

As my students began to share their experiences in a talking circle, I first wrote down the name of the speaker and then what I heard him or her say to the group. I focused on trying to capture key phrases and ways of telling. I had studied and practiced poetic inquiry in one of my research methodology courses, so I found myself drawn to writing down particularly strong word choices and ways students phrased their responses, as well as the general "gist" of the comment. After writing down two or three names in connection with the comments, I decided to stop recording (and cross out the previous) names of the speakers. I did not want the identity of the speaker to influence how I later reflected upon what I was hearing. I determined that when I emerged from the talking circle it would be more important for me to look at the comments for what they had to teach me about anti-homophobia teacher education than for me to focus on what I thought they were revealing about the student who made the comment. These impromptu teaching notes ended up becoming field notes for my unexpected autoethnographic research and the subsequent life writing it inspired.

The Person at the Intersection

> *As the autoethnographer, I am both the author and the focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed, the creator and the created. I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and describing as a storyteller. As an autoethnographer, I tell a situated story, constructed from my current position, one that is partial, incomplete, full of silences, and told at a particular time, for a particular reason, to a particular audience. I am well aware that all of us constantly reframe and restory our lives, attempting to arrive at a version that presents these lives as changing yet continuous and coherent.* (Ellis, 2009, p. 13)

According to Ellis (2004), "all autoethnographic writing occurs after experience" (p. 116), and it becomes the researcher's approach that situates the writing "along the continuum

of art and science" (p. 116). For the researcher hoping to follow "the traditional rules of ethnographic method," then Ellis advises, "it would be best if you had kept notes on the experience as it happened. The notes would serve as field notes and you'd write from those" (p. 116). The notes I took during my teaching encounter were not digitally recorded and then transcribed as a more traditional ethnographer may recommend for accuracy and validity, but they did offer me a set of field notes that I used to construct (and later deconstruct and reconstruct) my narrative. However, Ellis suggests that it is possible to engage in autoethnography even if we do so retrospectively without field notes:

> If you viewed your project as closer to art than science, then your goal would not be to portray *facts* of what happened to you accurately . . . but instead to convey the *meanings* you attached to the experience. You'd want to tell a story that readers could enter and feel a part of. You'd write in a way to evoke readers to feel and think about your life and their lives in relation to yours. You'd want them to experience your experience as if it were happening to them. (p. 116)

The writing process, whether through field notes constructed at the time or those composed retrospectively, requires the researcher simultaneously to *move in* and *move out* of an experience:

> I imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically. Revisiting the scene emotionally leads to remembering other details. The advantage of writing close to the time of the event is that is doesn't take much effort to access lived emotions—they're often there whether you want them to be or not. The disadvantage is that being so involved in the scene emotionally means that it's difficult to get outside it to analyze from a distance, from a cultural perspective. Yet both of these processes, moving in and

> moving out, are necessary to produce an effective autoethnography. That's why it's good to write about an event while your feelings are still intense, and then to go back to it when you're more emotionally distant. (Ellis, 2004, p. 118)

Autoethnography is not a singular process or telling, but rather it is an intentional process of re-viewing, revising, and re-writing.

Shortly after the encounter, I sat at my computer just weeks after the teaching encounter and began writing a narrative of how I perceived my experience. I returned to the PowerPoint slides that I had used when I taught my first class and the notes I had taken during the talking circle in an attempt to re-enter the learning space as much as I possibly could. I tried to recall what I saw, heard, felt, and perceived *in those* moments. I tried to re-live both what I remembered happening and how I remembered feeling *at that* time. I was conscious during the writing that "my current frames of memory—and my need to have a coherent sense of myself—influenced what I remembered and what the memories meant to me" (Ellis, 2004, p. 117). I was tempted to tidy up my story to try to make myself sound a bit wiser, but instead I attempted as much as possible to stick to how I was feeling and what I was thinking at the time of the incident. I chose to focus on "conveying the meanings" (Ellis, p. 116) that I was attaching to my experiences and feelings. Writing returned me to my feelings of intense vulnerability. I was new to teacher education and I was teaching about homophobia and transphobia—a "hot button" issue that I did not feel fully equipped to tackle. My feelings of vulnerability at the time of teaching and at the time of my writing helped me empathize with my teacher education students and their struggles with vulnerability as they first try out their teacher identities in classrooms. Although it can sometimes be difficult for seasoned educators to remember that beginning forays into teaching, whatever the content area might be, can be an

intensely vulnerable experience—one that changes how the novice teacher is able to perceive and make meaning from interactions with his/her students. Since I was writing about my encounter so close to the event, it was easy to "move into" (p. 118) the experience and re-member those feelings of vulnerability and let them shape my first draft writing process. I figured I could "move out" (p. 118) of the experience, going back to do more analysis and interpretation, revising and rewriting at a later time. The writing of the narrative itself was a fairly intense process that occurred rather quickly. I wrote the first narrative account of my classroom experience spending several hours a day for several days "rereading what I wrote the day before, then filling in new memories" (Ellis, 2004, p. 117).

When I included the narrative of this teaching experience in my candidacy exam, I thought that would be where the story would live in my doctoral journey. It would continue to grow within me and inform how I think, teach, and be in the world, but I believed it would be told only within the exam context for my advisory committee. Although I felt the pull of this story even before some of my committee members named this as my "potential life work", I could not imagine how I could ethically pursue this type of research that would focus on myself as a teacher, but would still involve the students who were in the class. Following further conversations and advice from my advisory committee, I tried to imagine how I should go about a dissertation study of this experience—what would be the most ethical way to conduct this "hindsight" (Freeman, 2010) teacher research? What more could I do to protect the identities of the students who were in the class, while still allowing myself the time and space to go deep within and then beyond the narrative towards the yet unknown?

Writing Difficult Stories

Autoethnography and life writing is an ethical *pedagogical* practice that contributes to a teacher's reflexivity and sense of wellbeing. Ellis (2009) argues:

> In life, we often have to make choices in difficult, ambiguous, and uncertain circumstances. At these times we feel the tug of obligation and responsibility. That's what we end up writing about. Autoethnographies show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111) . . . There is a caregiving function to autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2006). Listening to and engaging in others' stories is a gift and sometimes the best thing we can do for those in distress . . . our stories potentially offer readers companionship when they desperately need it (Mairs, 1993). Writing difficult stories is a gift to ourselves, a reflexive attempt to construct meaning in our lives and heal or grow from our pain. (Ellis, 2009, p. 317)

As a teacher educator, I experience relationships with pre-service teachers who are making choices in the "difficult, ambiguous, and uncertain circumstances" of classrooms, in which they live and work as both insiders and outsiders. They are in the vulnerable and fragile process of "figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean" at the beginning of their careers. I deeply resonate with this, because I am currently living similar tensions within the beginning of my teacher education career where I am both insider and outsider as a term-by-term instructor. Coming out with my struggles and my practices of reflexively constructing meaning and working through crisis becomes an offering and potentially a gift to my current and future students—whether they read, view, or experience the stories or not. I do not believe all the pre-service teachers I will work alongside will benefit from reading my life writing, but I

do believe that my commitment to practising artistic, critical, compassionate, and reflective processes inevitably changes who I am and how I position myself and my relationships to the known and unknown in my encounters with pre-service teachers.

I set priorities in *how* and *what* to tell about my transformative teaching and learning moments based on a strong belief that autoethnography and other forms of life writing are ethical practices that need careful and continual consideration. Ellis (2009) writes, "self-revelation always involves revelations about others" (p. 115). What may be at first perceived as one's own story is, of course, "also other people's stories" (Ellis, 2009, p. 115). Autoethnographers, and other types of life writers, do not "have an inalienable right to tell the stories of others" (p. 115). Ellis (2009) argues that this kind of work should be approached through "relational ethics," which, "requires us as researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and to initiate and maintain conversations" (p. 308). Ellis explains that she has learned through her work that she needs to "think it through, improvise, write and rewrite, anticipate and feel consequences. There is no one set of rules to follow" (p. 309). She then shares Frank's (2004) advice:

> We do not act on principles that hold for all times. We act as best we can at a particular time, guided by certain stories that speak to that time, and other people's affirmations that we have chosen the right stories. . . . The best any of us can do is to tell one another our stories of how we have made choices and set priorities. (Frank, 2004, pp. 191-192 quoted in Ellis, 2009, pp. 309-310).

Although there are potential ethical dilemmas for engaging in life writing that involves others (whether portrayed as real or fictional), I believe that my classroom encounter is one that speaks to this contemporary moment when LGBTQ* rights in educational contexts are

dramatically shifting. I have gained affirmation by others that this is a "right story" and one that needs to be told—in whatever partial, incomplete, or experimental ways I can find to do so. The best I can do now is to try to be as transparent as possible with the choices I am making and how I am setting my priorities.

Opening New Ways of Thinking

As time stretches between my actual teaching encounter and the time I am writing about it, I notice that the incident itself begins to blur. Elapsed time and the addition of many new teaching, telling, writing, reading, and living experiences begins to mix, meld, and muddle what once seemed a clear account. At first this greatly alarmed me. How could I claim to be offering anything significant to scholarship if I no longer had a clear sense of what had happened? Was this scholarship at all if I felt I no longer knew anything for certain, except that I was moving into the constantly shifting spaces of the unknown?

I was able to "bear being uncomfortable" (Kumashiro, 2010) and uncertain for a while by exploring forms of "transgressive, emergent, experimental writing" (Davies, 2011, p. 29) that intentionally blur what is known and unknown, what is fiction and fact, and what is scholarship and art. Freeman (2010) argues that for narrative researchers:

> We are neither the archeologists of our histories, unearthing what had been there all along, nor their inventors, fashioning them ex nihilo, out of nothing. Not unlike poets, we are creators, fashioning and refashioning the work that is our lives through narrative, via hindsight, in such a way as to disclose the potential that experience bears within it and that will be released, in this direction or that, depending on what happens later on. (pp. 65-66)

Dewey (1934) suggests that "the *material* out of which a work of art is composed belongs to the common world rather than the self," but what brings about self-expression in art is how the "self assimilates that material in a distinctive way to reissue it into the public world in a form that builds a new object" (p. 112). The *material* for my teaching narrative comes from and belongs to a "common world" experience of pre-service teacher education. Yet the experience becomes art because I, like all individuals, bring with me a unique "way of seeing and feeling that in its interaction with old material creates something new, something previously not existing into experience" (Dewey, 1934, p. 113).

It becomes my hope that becoming a teacher who practises experimental life writing, which for me includes creative non-fiction, letter and journal writing, photography, drawing, comic making, collage, play-writing, and poetry, I can move towards places where I can find the courage to begin to understand the incomprehensible, face the invisible, hear the inaudible, and think the unthinkable (Cixous, 1993, p. 38, cited in Davies, 2011, p. 42) in my teaching and learning. It is through the process of experimental writing, one must be willing to let go of what once seemed certain in order to open oneself to new, yet unknown possibilities:

> The thing that is both known and unknown, the most unknown and the best unknown, that is what we are looking for when we write. . . . we hope we will not be afraid of understanding the incomprehensible, facing the invisible, hearing the inaudible, which is of course thinking. Thinking is trying to think the unthinkable: thinking the thinkable is not worth the effort. Painting is trying to paint what you cannot paint and writing is trying to write what you cannot know before you have written. (Cixous, 1993, p. 38, cited in Davies, 2011, p. 42)

I did not know what I know now about my own teaching and learning practices before I started life writing. In fact, I did not even know much about what experimental life writing was or what affect it could have on my own reflective capacities as a teacher before I began writing. I learned a great deal about how to approach experimental writing processes by exploring the work of teacher educator and scholar Bronwyn Davies (2011).

One of Davies's (2011) experimental writing studies tells of how she had recently moved to a new neighbourhood and wanted a way "to engage in writing that would open me up to difference, to seeing differently, to being different in my newly familiar place of living" (p. 33). She claimed she needed a whole new way to approach research and writing: "This is where the experimentation with language itself becomes necessary, since the burden of old habits, and the sticky surface of familiar language must have their power displaced" (pp. 41-42). She intentionally decided she did not want to write autobiographically, nor did she want to interview others about their experiences in the neighbourhood, because "while such stories may have produced new and different insights, they were also at risk of repeating and propagating the already known stories" (p. 33). Instead, Davies spent a great deal of time carefully and mindfully attending to the places and people around her. From her observations and embodied experiences, Davies chose to represent her neighbourhood through a radio play. Although characters and scenes in the play were drawn from her experiences, they were fictionalized:

> I invited the readers to listen, not only to new possible meanings, but also to the sounds of the words, their rhythms, their poetry—to take pleasure in it, and also feel its pain. I wanted readers to feel their flesh prick, or their eyes water, as they entered the place . . . I wanted them to encounter the multiple, tangle of subjectivities . . . to recognize the place

> as both intensely familiar and simultaneously providing an opening on non-habituated ways of seeing/feeling/hearing. (p. 34)

Drawing upon post-structuralist theories, Davies argues, "it is in literary and artistic texts that new ways of thinking are most readily opened up" (p. 29). Davies refers to Butler's (1997) call for the "ethical necessity of disruptions to everyday ways of speaking and writing, and what she identifies as the problems generated by the ongoing repeated citations that make up the everyday world" (p. 29). Davies asks, "How does one disrupt these repeated citations in one's own thinking and writing? How does one launch oneself into the risky space of thinking against the grain of that which 'everyone knows?'" (p. 29). When Davies was writing against the grain to create her play she explicitly "did not set out to accomplish 'the truth' of it, as if I found *the* perspective from which all could be told" (p. 40). Instead, she explains that she "began from minute observed details" (p. 40). She advises, "writing beyond what is already known involves intense immersion in the known" (p. 41). Yet, an experimental writer must also have "the capacity for letting go, for forgetting, for allowing the known to die" (p. 41). Reading both Davies's literary examples of experimental life writing and how she theorizes her processes enabled me to imagine how I could represent my teaching and learning encounters in ways that might disrupt my usual ways of telling these stories. I could see how I needed to open myself to new ways of thinking about my experiences, which would mean I would have to let go and go beyond what I thought I knew both about teaching and learning, and about my own life writing and text-making processes.

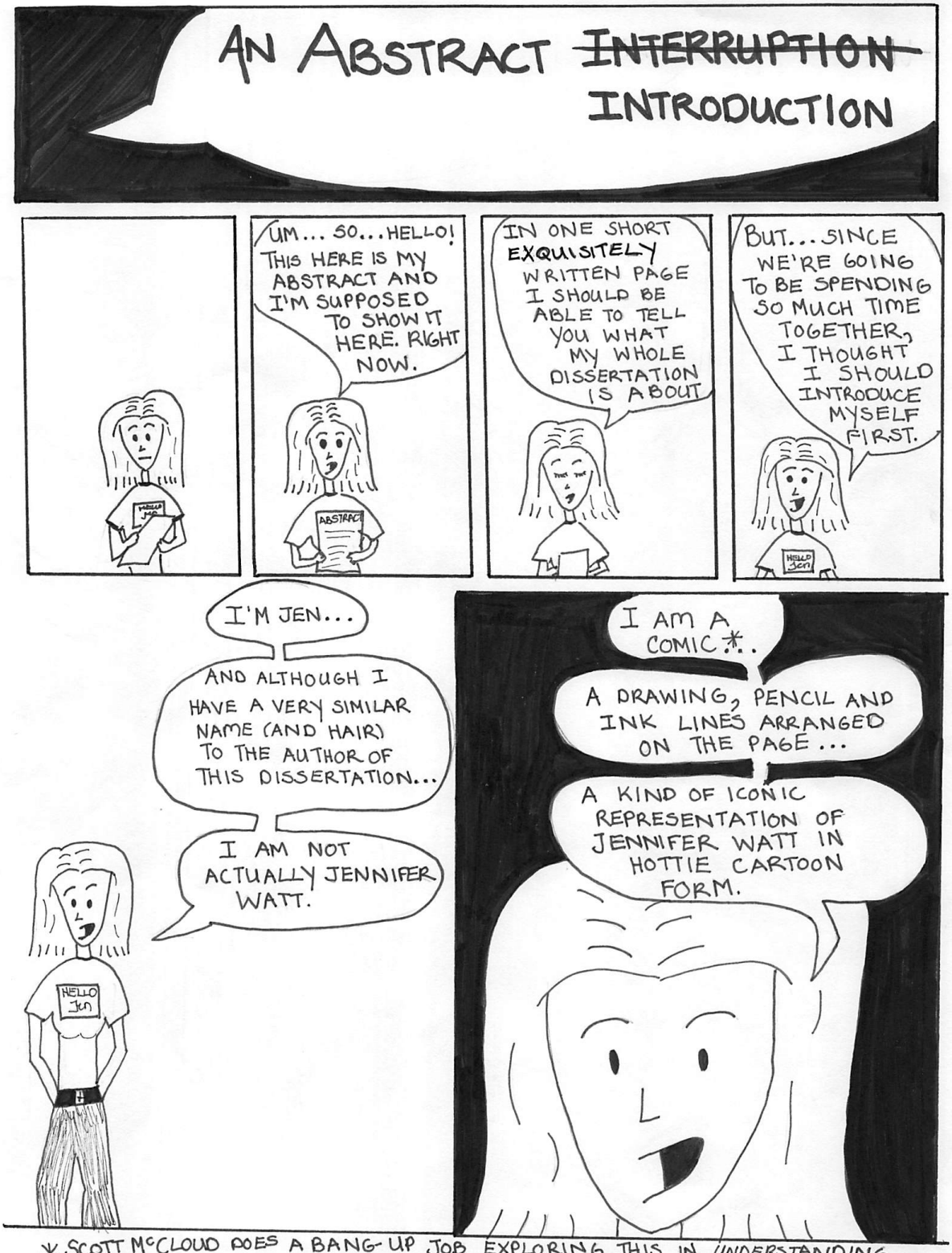
My experience as an English Language Arts teacher and a critical literacy teacher educator grounds how I approach, make, and understand texts and, in turn, how I approach, make, and understand knowledge. Janks (2010) explains that a critical literacy teacher is

"interested in what all kinds of texts (written, visual, and oral) do to readers, viewers, and listeners, and whose interest are served by what these texts do" (p. 19). Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013) elaborate:

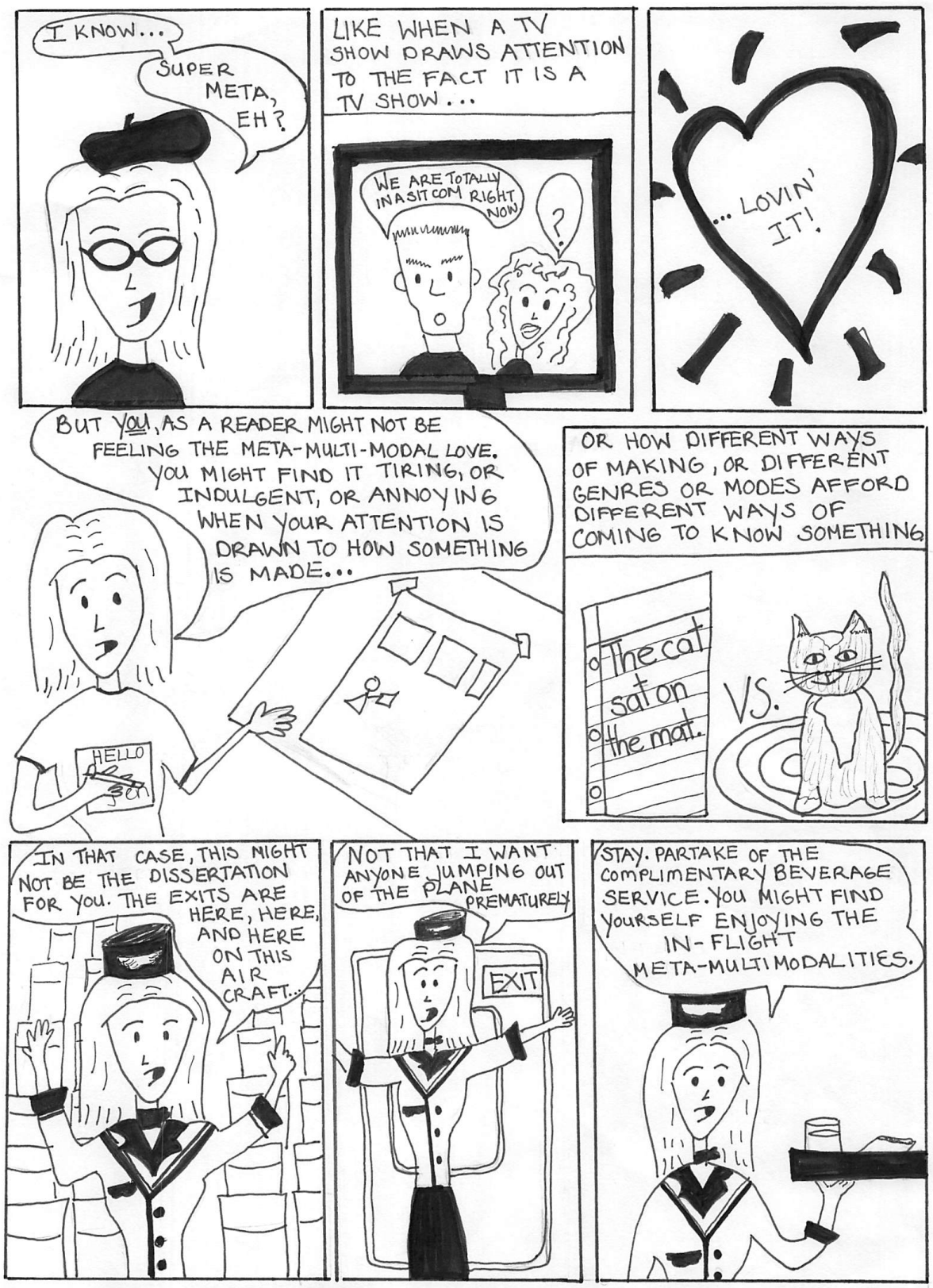
> In order to navigate through the plethora of texts that bombard us—print text, visual texts, audio texts, video texts, musical texts—citizens have to be able to have and to take agency. This involves understanding how texts are framed and how they position us as readers, how information is accessed, received, produced, and internalized through multimodal means, and how to read critically and critique all types of texts. (p. 65)

In the last decade, there has been an increasing interest by many critical literacy teachers in the intersections between New Literacy Studies (NLS) and social semiotic theories of multimodality. NLS is a "theory of literacy as a social practice" and recognizes that "the meanings associated" with reading and writing "vary across cultural time and space" and "are rooted in social relationships, including crucially relationships of power" (Kress & Street, 2006, p. viii). Multimodality attempts to "redress the emphasis on writing and speech as the central, salient modes of representation in favour of a recognition of how other modes—visual, gestural, kinaesthetic, three-dimensional—play their role in key communicative practices" (Kress & Street, 2006, p. vii). Pahl and Roswell (2006) argue, "To access the underlying meanings of literacy practices, we need to not only account for the materiality of texts, that is, the way they look, sound, and feel, but also have an understanding of who made the text, why, where, and when," or in other words, we need to "*see identity and social practice in the materiality of texts"* (p. 2, italics in the original). From this theoretical stance, I have purposely attempted to tell my teaching and learning stories through a variety of modes and to pay

attention to the identity and social practices that are embedded in the making of these multimodal texts.



* SCOTT McCLOUD DOES A BANG-UP JOB EXPLORING THIS IN *UNDERSTANDING COMICS* (1993) AND *MAKING COMICS* (2006). I AM DEEPLY IN-DEBTED TO HIM IN BOTH MY THINKING AND MAKING OF COMICS.


I KNOW...
SUPER META, EH?
LIKE WHEN A TV SHOW DRAWS ATTENTION TO THE FACT IT IS A TV SHOW...
WE ARE TOTALLY IN A SIT COM RIGHT NOW
?
... LOVIN' IT!
BUT YOU, AS A READER MIGHT NOT BE FEELING THE META-MULTI-MODAL LOVE. YOU MIGHT FIND IT TIRING, OR INDULGENT, OR ANNOYING WHEN YOUR ATTENTION IS DRAWN TO HOW SOMETHING IS MADE...
HELLO
OR HOW DIFFERENT WAYS OF MAKING, OR DIFFERENT GENRES OR MODES AFFORD DIFFERENT WAYS OF COMING TO KNOW SOMETHING
The cat sat on the mat.
VS.
IN THAT CASE, THIS MIGHT NOT BE THE DISSERTATION FOR YOU. THE EXITS ARE HERE, HERE, AND HERE ON THIS AIR CRAFT...
NOT THAT I WANT ANYONE JUMPING OUT OF THE PLANE PREMATURELY
EXIT
STAY. PARTAKE OF THE COMPLIMENTARY BEVERAGE SERVICE. YOU MIGHT FIND YOURSELF ENJOYING THE IN-FLIGHT META-MULTIMODALITIES.

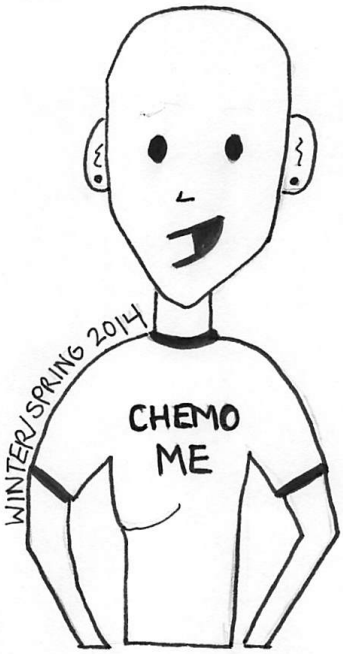

WHEN JENNIFER WORKED ON THE STORIES AND IDEAS IN THIS DISSERTATION, SHE SOMETIMES FELT SMOKE WAS COMING OUT OF HER EARS...
IF SHE DREW ME, SHE COULD LITERALLY DRAW SMOKE COMING OUT OF MY EARS...
... AND DRAWING EAR SMOKE IS CATHARTIC AND FUNNY.
ART INSPIRED BY MUNCH'S (1893) THE SCREAM
THIS DISSERTATION IS ABOUT TELLING STORIES ABOUT TEACHING, LEARNING, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE THAT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO TELL.
SOMETIMES, WHEN THINGS ARE DIFFICULT, WE HAVE TO TRY TELLING OUR STORIES DIFFERENTLY.
SO WE CAN COME TO KNOW OURSELVES IN NEW WAYS.
ART INSPIRED BY ROCKWELL'S (1960) TRIPLE SELF PORTRAIT
NOW, WOULD YOU LIKE PRETZELS OR COOKIES?

Crash, Cancer, and Compassion: Accidental Life Writing

I included the comic at the end of the last section not only as an illustrative example of how multimodal texts can help us tell difficult stories and come to know ourselves in new ways, but also because it represents for me a transition between the two major crash sites of this dissertation. I was distracting myself with the final inking of that comic on a warm, September morning before receiving my official diagnosis of an infiltrating lobular carcinoma in my left breast. I came home numb. I noticed the comic I had been working on and I fixated on the one panel on the first page where the comic Jen says, "I'm Jen . . . and although I have a very similar name (and hair) to the author of this comic, I am not actually Jennifer Watt." The same hair—a very small, bracketed phrase was making me feel like I had misrepresented myself. I knew that because of cancer, my hair, along with almost everything else that seemed certain in my life was about to change and I truly had no control over the outcome. That comic was the last piece I completed before I took official leave.

The following comic is the first piece I attempted on my return a year later: a visual representation of my transformations from my comic self from before the diagnosis, to my Chemo self (minus eyebrows, eye lashes and a left breast), to my come-back self with mysteriously (yet deeply appreciated) curly hair and a left prosthetic to balance things out in the t-shirt department. Although many things did profoundly change during my year with cancer, many things also beautifully stayed the same. I still smiled and laughed a lot (which is why I try to represent my facial expression the same between my three comic selves). I still engaged in deep and meaningful relationships with those I love. And I still read, drew, collaged, walked, and wrote in order to "bear being uncomfortable for a while" (Kumashiro, 2004).


SPRING/
SUMMER 2013
COMIC
ME


WINTER/SPRING 2014
CHEMO
ME


SUMMER/FALL 2014
COME
BACK
ME

Willingness to Rest in Uncertainty

Returning home from a walk by the river, I wrote the following on the day of my diagnosis:

> This is a story I never wanted to write. At least not now. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But it is a story that I am living and I am trying to somehow find meaning, find hope, find love, and find peace within. Because it is a story I have no choice but to live. Yet I still have choices in HOW to live it. (Personal journal entry, September 24, 2013)

Learning how to live compassionately and graciously with cancer became my moment-to-moment focus. I searched for reassurance for my fear and wisdom for my uncertainty, finding both in Buddhist teachings on contemplative practices, especially in the writings of Pema Chödrön (2003), Thich Nhat Hanh (1987, 2007), and Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012). In these writings, I recognized that it is the inevitable discomfort, uncertainty, crisis, and suffering that comes embedded in our human experience that offers us the opportunity to become awakened. Chödrön (2003) writes:

> Ordinarily we are swept away by habitual momentum. We don't interrupt our patterns even slightly. With practice, however, we learn to stay with a broken heart, with a nameless fear, with the desire for revenge. Sticking with uncertainty is how we learn to relax in the midst of chaos, how we learn to be cool when the ground beneath suddenly disappears. We can bring ourselves back to the spiritual path countless times every day simply by exercising our willingness to rest in the uncertainty of the present moment—over and over again. (p. 8)

For me, building a willingness to rest in the uncertainty of the present moment requires practising mindfulness and meditation in a variety of ways. Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) writes:

> Every day we have many feelings. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes we are sorrowful, sometimes angry, irritated, or afraid; and these feelings fill our mind and heart. One feeling lasts for a while, and then another comes, and another, as if there is a stream of feelings for us to deal with. Practising meditation is to be aware of each feeling. (p. 39)

We may engage in sitting or walking meditation, yoga, writing, art, or other mindful practices to pay attention to and let go of any attachments in our flow of feelings and thoughts, allowing us to live more fully and peacefully. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012) teaches:

> Mindfulness as a practice provides endless opportunities to cultivate greater intimacy with your own mind and to tap into and develop your deep interior resources for learning, growing, healing, and potentially for transforming your understanding of who you are and how you might live more wisely and with greater well-being, meaning, and happiness in the world. (p. 4)

Yet these practices are not for ourselves alone. Thich Nhat Hanh (2007) writes, "If you take good care of yourself, you help everyone. You stop being a source of suffering to the world, and you become a reservoir of joy and freshness" (p. 18). This idea of cultivating practices of caring for ourselves and developing our interior learning resources so that we can authentically help others do the same for themselves matters deeply to me. It matters because, like many other people, I am trying to figure out how to live a meaningful and joy-filled life even in the midst of ongoing uncertainties. It also matters greatly for teachers who value finding ways of cultivating wellbeing and well-becoming for all those who participate in the often uncertain and crisis-filled field of education.

The Deep Work of Paying Attention

After devoting a year to cultivating mindfulness practices, I returned to my research with new ways of being present and new hopes for gentler, more compassionate ways of teaching, learning, and re-searching difficult stories. I shared these hopes with my doctoral supervisor who has been a practitioner of meditation and mindfulness for many years. He introduced me to the theories and methods of life writing and literary métissage (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo, 2009; Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, and Sinner, 2012), which he had recently discovered for his own teaching and research. Chambers et al. (2012) directly connect life writing to the "practices of wisdom traditions where through the deep work of paying attention to particular places and events, the practitioner may be rewarded with a 'heart of wisdom' (Myerhoff, as cited in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), a greater understanding of others, and self in relation to others" (p.xxi). I became excited about how life writing could become a way to integrate holistic, mindful, and compassionate practices as I returned to my research.

As individual curriculum scholars, Cynthia Chambers, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Carl Leggo, and Anita Sinner used a variety of forms of experimental autobiographical writing and visual arts to explore the places they had lived or visited, their past histories as students and teachers, and their memories and/or present awareness of formal and informal learning spaces and practices. As they began to work, think, write, and perform more frequently as a collective, they began to see generative resonances and dissonances between their produced works and their processes as life writers. They described life writers as those who "delve into creative nonfiction through memoir and autobiographical fragments, poetry and lyrical prose, story and personal essay, rumination and reflection, photography and fine art. In many cases they mix and juxtapose these genres creatively and in vibrant ways" (p. xxii). In an educational context,

the purpose for this creative delving and mixing is to explore how curriculum can be conceptualized as *currere* (Pinar and Grumet, 1976), or "the running of a course" (p. 31). Curriculum, understood as *currere,* acknowledges and embraces the complexity, messiness, and interconnectedness of experiences. It conceptualizes curriculum as much more than a school document implemented to prescribe and map learning outcomes, but rather as an enactment of all the predictable and unpredictable, formal and informal interactions that invite learning throughout the course of one's life. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) claim that, "if curriculum is *currere,* then autobiography is the theorizing of *currere.* It is a way for educators to see more clearly themselves in relation to their circumstances, past and present, and to understand those relationships and their implications more deeply" (p. 31). It is through autobiographical writing that "curriculum scholars and teachers become interpreters and translators of human experiences and provocateurs of individual and social change" (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 37).

The transformative potential of life writing becomes praxis through literary métissage, a concept that heeds "John Ralston Saul's (2008) claim that Canada is 'a Métis civilization'" (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xxii). Before I discuss further how the process of literary métissage becomes a potential transformative praxis, I must first address how and why Ralston Saul's claim is potentially problematic. While at first this claim may seem to be an inclusive invitation for all Canadians to honour Métis culture, many Métis people feel that this concept takes away from the specificity of Métis culture, language, traditions, and territories that are not, and should not, be shareable. Therefore, when I write about literary métissage, I want to clearly and respectfully acknowledge that métissage, as I am using it in this dissertation, refers to a literary process and is not the same as being Métis in the Western Canadian Michif context. As a

literary process and praxis, I align myself with how Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) conceptualize métissage:

> We take métissage as a counternarrative to the grand narratives of our time, a site for writing and surviving in the interval between different cultures and languages, particularly in colonial contexts; a way of merging and blurring genres, texts, and identities; an active literary stance, political strategy, and pedagogical practice. (p. 9)

Tracing the origins of métissage, Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo (2009) tell the story of Métis in Greek mythology. Métis was Zeus's first wife and the mother of the goddess of arts and wisdom Athena: "Like her daughter, Métis was wise, she was also known as intelligent, a figure of skill and craft, a shape shifter" (p. 35). Life writing and literary métissage aspires to this mix of wisdom, intelligence, skill, craft, and shape shifting. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo write:

> The word métissage is derived from the Latin *mixiticius,* meaning the weaving of a cloth from different fibres (Mish, 1990, p. 761). Thus métissage, through its genealogy of magical cunning (from Greek) and mixing (from Latin), weaves disparate elements into multi-valenced, metonymic, and multi-textured forms, unraveling the logic of linearity, hierarchy, and uniformity. Métissage affirms, rather than polarizes, differences (Lionnet, 1989) and calls those who practice métissage to create an aesthetic product that combines disparate elements without collapsing or erasing difference. The act of creating new mixed forms, stronger and more resilient than the existing ones, gives métissage its generativity in the face of difference and thus its power to reconfigure the past, to transform the present, and to imagine otherwise (Rushdie, 1991). (pp. 35-36)

In *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times* (2009), Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo created a combined text of disparate elements by braiding together multiple contributions in varying genres from each of the authors. In *A Heart of Wisdom: Life Writing as Empathetic Inquiry* (2012) the same authors, along with Anita Sinner, continued the praxis of literary métissage by combining their own genres of life writing, but also extending their invitation to multiple contributors who based creative non-fiction on their "first-person experiences of coming to understand what matters most to them (and others), what sustains them (and others) and the places they inhabit, and what they have given their hearts to" (p. xx). Each of these life writing texts becomes more aesthetically compelling and theoretically complex through the juxtapositions of multiple genres from multiple authors.

Composing and Performing Startling Interconnections

Braiding becomes the central metaphor for the literacy processes and textual products of life writing and literary métissage:

> We employ métissage as a creative strategy for braiding socio-historical conditions of difference and points of affinity (Haraway, 1994) into autobiographical texts. These literary texts have the potential to become the kind of literacy called for in these times, a literacy that transforms both reader and writer (Chambers, Donald, & Hasebe-Ludt, 2002), as well as the public, social and political places which they inhabit (Freire, 1993; Galeano, 1989/1991). In this way, métissage is not only a theory but also a thoughtful, political praxis (Lionnet, 1989; Zuss, 1997), one that resists "heterophobia" (Memmi, as cited in Lionnet, 1989), the fear of mixing, and the desire for the pure and untainted. (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 36)

In particular, life writing and literary métissage can be textually imagined, designed, and produced as a three or four-strand braid, a traditional technique that is found in diverse cultures and known both for its aesthetic beauty and structural integrity (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xxiv). Chambers et al. (2012) write:

> Our stories are always singular and plural, familiar and unfamiliar, and constituted and constituting. Therefore, the act of braiding both composes and performs startling interconnections among diverse stories while also acknowledging how we are beings with agency and responsibility. Through our writing and our willingness to share our writing with others, we perform our commitment to living with careful intent, critical interrogation, and thoughtful awareness. None of our stories are ours alone. (p. xxvii)

Although they caution "there is no formula for the mixing" (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 13) of individual pieces into an newly-integrated whole, the authors describe the need to pay attention to "how each individual piece begins and ends in relation to another, how it contributes to the whole body of the métissage text, how all the pieces come together around each theme as an organic body without losing their individual and different textures and voices" (p. 13). In this way they aim for "a collective textual integrity and fibred texture akin to a crafted hermeneutic interpretation, one that lingers with the texts, ask questions that arise from them, and interprets them critically, functionally, and aesthetically" (Chambers et al., 2012, p. xxv).

Figure 2: Four Strand Braid

For the production of their 2009 book, Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo created three braids composed of three strands for seven different themes. Each strand of each braid was a contribution from one of the three authors—the braid became the combined collective writing. In their 2012 book (Chambers et al.), the four strands of the braid were developed from four themes: memory work, place work, curriculum work, and social work. Each strand was composed of multiple contributions from a wide variety of authors. In both texts there are brief descriptions of the themes, but there is no analysis of individual pieces. Each piece moves directly from one to the other without introduction or explanation, even though the genre or subject matter may differ greatly. In this way, compassionate and empathetic analysis and interpretation are embedded in the storytelling experience:

> The story experience as a whole is the teaching and the meaning; and trusting the experience of the listener during the story creates an unforgettable knowing. The listeners are the stage on which the story erupts and resolves. A spoken or pointed-out moral teaching conceived and added to the end of a tale dilutes the listener's potent experience of becoming one with the story—becoming both the cause and the effect of the problem in the story. Becoming the good and bad characters helps the listener gain an inner experience of the cause and effect of actions on self, other, and the natural world. The spontaneous involvement in an unfolding story stimulates the creation of an inner story regardless of whether one realizes a specific lesson later. (Simms, 2011, pp. 136-137)

Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) write, "In telling our stories, we present the dilemmas and questions we live with, without moralizing or being prescriptive or making universal claims about how to read life and life writing" (p. 14). Life writing and reading

become about giving and receiving stories, gaining and offering empathy, and learning and teaching compassion from and for each other.

Practising and Braiding Vulnerability, Discomfort, Mindfulness, and Compassion

This dissertation has become my way of practising being uncomfortable and uncertain in the messiness of my life's *currere.* It has become my way of paying attention to and celebrating the resilient spirits of teachers and learners. It is through my accidental life writing about my two crash experiences that I began to recognize how vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness, and compassion need to be braided to strengthen and make more beautiful the core of who I am and who I want to become as a teacher and learner. The next four chapters of this text become an offering of a four-strand braid, each strand organized around the active and present verb "practising": (1) Practising Vulnerability; (2) Practising Discomfort; (3) Practising Mindfulness; and (4) Practising Compassion. The active quality of this verb encourages me to remember that this is an on-going and never-finished process. It is about doing and being in the present. It is about offering experimental fragments and artifacts, and moving beyond what is already known.

I am a single author, so my text will sound, look, and feel different than the collaborative life writing I previously described. However, I wanted as much as possible to replicate the multiple strand and multi-voiced qualities of that writing for my readers as well. I recognize that like Maxine Greene (1995):

> Neither myself nor my narrative can have . . . a single strand. I stand at the crossing point of too many social and cultural forces; and in any case, I am forever on the way. My identity has to be perceived as multiple, even as I stride towards some coherent notion of what is humane and decent and just. (p. 1)

Therefore, within each strand of the braid, I represent multiple identities through a variety of different genres of writing: letter writing, journal pieces, comics, photos, poetry, creative non-fiction, collages, scenes from a play, and an alphabet book. These various genres provide examples of me in the active, present, and sometimes vulnerable process of practising—I am intentionally not a polished "performance ready" artist in each form. Instead, I focus on making the insights I generate from the process of practising as transparent as possible for other teachers and learners. Like Anne Lamott (1994), I believe we learn to make meaning through the act of practising, just like we learn to play a musical instrument through practice: "What's real is that if you do your scales every day, if you slowly try harder and harder pieces, if you listen to great musicians play music you love you'll get better" (Lamott, 1994, p. 14). I tried to open myself to allow the practices of working in a variety of genres and modes to help me get better at being a teacher, learner, and human being. I try to model for other pre- or in-service teachers what it means to approach meaning-making practices with a beginner's frame of mind, because, as Lamott suggests, when "beginners are learning to play" they might "need encouragement to keep their hands moving across the page" (p. 171). Modeling, encouraging, and choosing a beginner's stance as a practitioner has opened possibilities both in how I make sense of my research and how I approach teaching. As Greene (1995) suggests, "When, however, a person chooses to view herself or himself in the midst of things, as beginner or learner or explorer, and has the imagination to envisage new things emerging, more and more begins to seem possible" (p. 22).

I also try to represent myself as multiple authors, since I believe we are very different authors depending on our context, circumstances, and intended audience. In this way, I adapt Robert Mizzi's (2010) concept of multivocality:

> The use of multivocality in my autoethnographic writing has three distinct purposes. First, the use of multivocality illustrates that there is no single and temporarily-fixed voice that a researcher possesses; rather, there are several past and present narrative voices that interact within and reflect the researcher's subjectivity. Second, multivocality deconstructs competing tensions within the autoethnographer as s/he connects the personal self to the social context. Finally, multivocality unfixes identity in a way that exposes the fluid nature of identity as it moves through particular contexts. (Paragraph 42)

Instead of naming the various voices in my writing as Mizzi does in his article, I instead include pieces that I believe represent myself at various roles and stages in the *currere* of my life. For example, I include one poem in each strand that was written at very early stages in my teaching career when I was experiencing crisis and finding new balance as a beginner teacher. Through literary métissage, this poet and teacher from almost twenty years ago is invited to meet and mix with the teacher educator and researcher that I am now becoming. I also include one "cancer piece" in each of the strands, inviting a presence and place for the author I was during my year living with and learning from cancer and the subsequent years of recovery. Throughout the braid, I also include my critical literacy teacher/academic author-self who is particularly interested in telling the stories behind how and why I have made and included some of my multimodal pieces and why multimodality matters. In this way, I feel like Mizzi (2010):

> I can better provide a context in which the stories situate themselves and interpret underlying tensions that complicate life experiences. Since one encounter can be experienced from various perspectives, multivocality helps to name and unravel these

> perspectives in order to understand what is shaping the researcher's practices, anxieties, and beliefs. (Paragraph 58)

To balance my single (yet plural) authorship and to provide other perspectives beyond my own voices, I have included the words and ideas from multiple other authors. Sometimes these voices and ideas are integrated into individual pieces, sometimes they appear as quotes in text boxes, which are meant to evoke the idea of a four-stranded braid, or are combined with a photograph or other visual image. I also am very grateful to include voices that represent my students. Although their identities have been fictionalized, the voices of the teacher candidates who bravely co-created my transformative moment teaching about homophobia and transphobia become central to my life writing.

I begin each strand with a brief introduction to my current theorizing about what it might mean to be practising vulnerability or discomfort or mindfulness or compassion. Within these introductions, I give a brief contextual framing of each piece of writing that composes the strand. Then, I move directly into the various pieces that compose the strand itself. Like Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) and Chambers et al. (2012), I do not analyze or offer interpretations or moralizations for individual pieces. The braiding of the texts—how I choose to place each piece in relation to the others—becomes an integrated analysis, interpretation, and representation. In one final chapter following the four-strand braid, I reflect upon the processes of life writing and braiding literary métissage. I also discuss the transformative possibilities of practising vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness, and compassion for my own and others' teaching and learning in areas of teacher education, LGBTQ* education and advocacy, mindfulness and wellbeing education, and cancer survivorship education.

CHAPTER TWO
Practising Vulnerability

Practising Vulnerability

. . . Regardless of our willingness to do vulnerability, *it does us.* When we pretend we can avoid vulnerability we engage in behaviors that are often inconsistent with who we want to be. Experiencing vulnerability isn't a choice—the only choice we have is how we're going to respond when we are confronted with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. (Brown,2012, p. 45)

Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Don't worry about appearing sentimental. Worry about being unavailable; worry about being absent or fraudulent. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it. If you're a writer, you have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act—truth is always subversive. (Lamott, 1994, p. 206)

Vulnerability isn't good or bad: It's not what we call a dark emotion, nor is it always a light, positive experience. Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is a weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness. To foreclose on our emotional life out of a fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living. (Brown, 2012, p. 33)

Writing is a practice field. It teaches us how to do happy. It teaches us how to do brave. It teaches us how to do open, caring, loyal, resourceful, and yes, vulnerable. If we can do it on the page, we can let our imagination connect the dots, we begin to get a picture of ourselves as larger and more fully human than we may yet have managed. (Cameron, 1998, p. 146)

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper or more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is our path. (Brown, 2012, p. 34)

Life writing is one of my ways of practising vulnerability. Writing, or making art in some other mode, teaches me to own, engage, and stay with my own vulnerability or the vulnerability of others. As a teacher and teacher educator, I am aware of how often and how powerfully vulnerability is present in the interactions teachers have with our students, colleagues, or even the content that we teach. I start this chapter by exploring how teaching, learning, and researching that purposefully embraces vulnerability can open us to more "whole-hearted" (Brown, 2012) connections with ourselves and others. I next shift my attention to how teachers and learners can practise vulnerability through the process of life writing. Then before I begin sharing the vulnerability life writing pieces, I briefly introduce and contextualize each. This may seem somewhat tedious for readers to try to make it through a long list of descriptions of pieces before actually seeing and engaging with the texts or images. However, this introduction is meant to give the context of how, why, where, and when the pieces were created so that each piece can then become braided with the next without comment or interpretation.

Vulnerability in Bathing Suits and Professional Armour

Every mid to late August since I became a teacher I have experienced at least one dream where I am in some stage of nakedness in my classroom. In my most frequent pre-back-to-school anxiety dream, I look ready for a day at the beach—swimsuit, towel, a good book to read—but suddenly I am in front of a classroom full of high school students. It is not a beach day, rather it is the all-important first day of school, but I somehow mixed up the dates, and apparently the outfits. I am not ready. I am not prepared. And I stand exposed, swimsuit and all, in front of my future students as they take in all of my naked vulnerabilities. Since many of the nearest and dearest to my heart are also teachers, I know that in the weeks leading up to a new teaching term that I am not alone in my dreams of back-to-school exposures. One of my friends consistently has a dream

where she is teaching a group of engaged early years students, before she stops, looks down, and realizes that she is not wearing a skirt—pantyhose, yes; shoes, yes; skirt, no. My husband is a university teacher and in the weeks before classes begin he dreams of dragging his hockey bag to the changing room to get dressed to play, but he suddenly realizes he is missing major pieces of equipment, so he will not be able to step safely onto the ice. Friends and family share stories of when they were students and had nightmares about showing up late to school in pajamas, or sitting down to an exam in which there is not one single question they recognize, or suddenly realizing they are stark naked in the middle of the cafeteria. Teaching and learning has the conscious and subconscious, private and public capacity to strip, and reveal, and expose, and make bare. It is vulnerable stuff.

If teaching and learning is vulnerable stuff, then what is the stuff of vulnerability? Researcher Brené Brown (2012) defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34). She argues that vulnerability is not inherently good or bad, positive or negative (p. 33), yet when vulnerability is acknowledged and embraced it can be a powerful prompt for engaged and reflective living. In her popular 2010 TED talk called "The Power of Vulnerability," Brown explains how many of the research participants who she defined as *whole-hearted* "didn't talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they talk about it being excruciating." Instead, she says:

> They just talked about it being necessary. They talked about the willingness to say I love you first. The willingness to do something where there are no guarantees. The willingness to breathe through waiting for the doctor to call after your mammogram. The willingness to invest in a relationship that may or may not work out. They thought this was fundamental.

The willingness to be and do vulnerability is fundamental because "it is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences" (Brown, 2012, p. 12). Teaching and learning are certainly human experiences, yet in order for teaching and learning to become *meaningful* human experiences we need to invite in, name, and make space for the vulnerability that is already present. Because if you have ever stood in front of a class, for even the briefest of moments, you *know* vulnerability is already present. When we teach, we purposely put ourselves out there, into uncertainty, in order to be seen and to see others. And, boy, are we ever seen. We are seen by many sets of eyes every day. Our students see us, and make sense of us, through their own vulnerabilities—through their own desires and struggles to become (in)visible. As teachers, we are seen when we are at our kindest and when we are struggling to make it through until break. We are seen when we are prepared, planned, and ready, and we are seen when we have to adjust last minute to a fire drill, and when the internet does not work on the day our lesson depended on it, and when we try for the first time to teach about an issue of social justice that is complicated and controversial. We are seen. In *all* these moments, for us and for our students, vulnerability is present.

In my dream, showing up for a day at the beach in my bathing suit did not feel vulnerable, even though I might have done so in front of hundreds of strangers. Yet the change of context to a classroom—the shift in place, cultural scripts and costumes, and professional expectations—altered what was deemed appropriate and what felt risky. I suddenly recognized and experienced vulnerability because of a contextual transgression. In the beach context, my physical exposure was welcomed, normalized, even relaxing; in the other school context, it became the material of my nightmares: a symbol of my stripped professionalism and doubts laid bare. Brown (2012) tells

about a contextual transgression that she experienced when she began to research and write about vulnerability:

> The new information created a major dilemma for me personally: On the one hand, how can you talk about the importance of vulnerability in an honest and meaningful way without being vulnerable? On the other hand, how can you be vulnerable without sacrificing your legitimacy as a researcher? To be honest, I think emotional accessibility is a shame trigger for researchers and academics. Very early in our training, we are taught that cool distance and inaccessibility contribute to prestige, and that if you're too relatable, your credentials come into question. . . . *How could I risk being really vulnerable and tell stories about my own messy journey through this research without looking like a total flake? What about my professional armor?* (Brown, 2012, p. 12)

Brown felt she transgressed when she wrote about emotions and told her own stories of vulnerability within the context of academia. She believed she needed a "cool distance" in order to maintain legitimacy as a researcher and scholar. Telling her own "messy" stories of feeling vulnerable in her field of social work, her life parenting, or her journey through research might have felt a bit like showing up to an academic conference in a bathing suit, rather than in "professional armor."

Brown's dilemma, questions, and vulnerability are raw and real for me. I feel vulnerable every time I describe what I am doing for my dissertation research. Most of the time, I tell a bit about my research and I receive back a reaction of fascination, delight, or a look of deep empathetic recognition—an, "Oh, I have felt that. I have experienced that. I wish more people talked about the tensions and struggles and crashes when I was learning how to teach." My vulnerability invites others to become vulnerable with me. As Brown (2012) suggests,

"vulnerability begets vulnerability; courage is contagious" (p. 54). My vulnerability when I describe my research comes mostly from my fear that I will hear (and I often do), "Is that *research*? Telling stories, writing, drawing? You can get a Ph.D. doing that? But that isn't *real* research is it?" My ego puffs itself up and starts to put on the professional armour I keep handy nearby. I want to lecture at length about the well-established and hard-fought theoretical, methodological, and epistemological grounding for my approach. Instead, I have been practising new answers that grow from the roots of my vulnerability, "I don't know if it is 'real research'. I can't guarantee they'll give me Ph.D. for all of this when I'm done. But I do know that these have been my experiences when I teach, learn, live, and write. I know I feel deeply. I know I sometimes hurt and I sometimes feel joy. I know my heart gets bigger when I teach and braver when I learn. Except when it doesn't. And then that makes me curious and I want to know why I am hiding my heart, or protecting it, or not giving it space to expand."

Life Writing to Reclaim Essential Emotional Parts of Our Lives

Brown (2012) makes clear that risking vulnerability and sharing her "experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them" (p. 45) in all aspects of her life, including her research, was critical to being able to live with courage, compassion, and connection:

> If we want to reclaim the essential emotional part of our lives and reignite passion and purpose, we have to learn how to own and engage with our own vulnerability and how to feel the emotions that come with it. For some of us, it's new learning, and for others it's relearning. (Brown, 2012, p. 34)

Often I have found that when I need to reclaim the essential emotional part of my life, I need to begin on the page. Cameron (1998) proposes "what frightens people about writing" is the idea that "once we put something on the page we are rendered vulnerable" (p. 147). People fear

that by committing an opinion or idea to paper we allow ourselves to be seen, we open ourselves to criticism, and we, therefore, make ourselves vulnerable. Although she admits there may be some truth in this fear, she also argues that, "Once I have put something on the page I am also rendered a little less vulnerable. I have claimed for myself a piece of turf on which I am willing to stand" (p. 147). In writing, we commit an idea or opinion to paper and we choose to be seen (even if we only see ourselves in some new way), we invite conversation (even if it is only with our own multiple voices (Mizzi, 2010)), and we welcome the vulnerability that is already inevitably present. As Leggo (2010) warns, "there are many dangers in life writing, but there are many dangers in avoiding life writing" (p. 70). The practice of life writing becomes a courageous response to vulnerability rather than a reaction to or retraction from it.

The challenge in this practice of life writing is to let go and actually allow ourselves to write—to invite the flow or flood or trickle of words, ideas, and emotions without immediate censorship. Cameron (1998) encourages that we need:

> To let ourselves write when we are writing—not worry, fret, stew over how what we write will later be read. This is the conscious practice—the conscious choice—of vulnerability. It is not easy for any of us. It is not easy, but, paradoxically, it is where our strength lies. (p. 147)

Although both difficult and strength building, writing through vulnerability opens us to shake things up:

> Vulnerability requires that we contradict ourselves. It requires that we change our minds. It requires that our perspective shifts. Vulnerability, which is honesty's shy younger sister, is the part of ourselves that renders us capable of great art, art that enters and explores the heart. (Cameron, 1998, p. 148)

Shy younger sister Vulnerability opens us to practising art; and art, in turn, offers a way for practising vulnerability. As Nelson (1991) suggests, "The simple act of starting with the heart can transform both our writing and our being. As we take back our feelings, value and validate them, acknowledge and explore them, we experience a new creativity and power in our words and a new vitality in our lives" (p. 37). Vulnerability is the birthplace for all the life writing I have included in this strand. I move on in this next section to contextualize each piece of life writing before I share the pieces themselves.

Contextualizing the Practising Vulnerability Life Writing Pieces

"Translucence"

The first piece is a poem called "Translucence," which I wrote in my second year of teaching. I had moved to England and after spending one term supply teaching in a school in London, I had been offered a permanent position in Oxford. It was my first few weeks at the school and I was attempting to find my way—both in a geographical sense (where was the staff room; where was the photocopier; how did I find my way to the lesson I was supposed to cover), but also in a professional sense (who were my most supportive colleagues; who and what could help me, as a foreigner and novice teacher, navigate this new school system; how could I meet the diverse needs of my students). After a particularly public and difficult encounter with a student who was rather rightfully resisting the arrival of this new, young, foreign teacher during his high-stakes exam year, I was left shaken. I dealt with the situation as best I could and then talked to my Head of Department for further advice and support. I was asked to write an official "Incident Report," which was recorded on triplicate paper. While I struggled over what to describe and explain on this official report (just how *had* an apparently benign interaction exploded so quickly?), I paused and wrote two poems. I scrawled them on

the back of scrap paper and then transferred them into my journal when I got home exhausted and distraught that night.

I re-discovered the poems a few years ago when I was conducting artefactual research for a film I was making for a course in my doctoral program. I was shocked at how deeply the poems still resonated within me. At once, they transported me back to that lonely, cold, rain splattered afternoon when I needed to write more than an official, bureaucratic report if I had any chance of making meaning of the encounter and if I had any hope of building enough resilience to face that same student the next morning. Yet, re-reading "Translucence" many years later, I also found myself re-reading many of my present experiences: my vulnerability as a mother, as a doctoral student, and new teacher educator. I could hear the voices of my current teacher education students as they shared the stories of how they were beginning to navigate the complicated landscapes of schools. Now as I listen when my teacher education students tell me the stories they want and need to tell, I often recognize the line from my poem: "my essence throbs vulnerability."

"Rushing River Realizations"

This is the first of four "cancer pieces" I have included in this dissertation—one situated in each strand of the braid. Two of the pieces come from writing in my journal and the other two pieces come from emails I sent to friends and family as a reflective update for those who loved and worried about me during my year of active treatment. I decided to include my voice as a cancer patient and survivor into my research, because this voice is now inextricably linked to how I identify as a teacher and learner and how I make sense of my past and present experiences. Mizzi (2010) writes about his own experience engaging in multivocality in his autoethnographic research:

> What I mean is, there were many narrative voices that underlined my voice within the story. To ignore them meant that I was silencing parts of me that could explain what kind of underlying anxieties and considerations existed and how they interrelated with each other. Through this approach, I was able to bring to light how identity was not simply one dimensional, temporarily-fixed, or static; rather, there were several competing, shifting, and differing voices that cross space and time shaping my identity. (p. 8)

I could ignore or silence my cancer voice, but just as Mizzi courageously explored a variety of different voices in his writing, I also wanted to attend to this shifting, differing dimension of my identity. I believe my voice as a cancer survivor helps me to tell about and teach how I am practising vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness, and compassion in a different resonating pitch and in a different emotional tone than the other voices that emerge in my writing. Yet writing in this voice is vulnerable business. Mizzi admits, "re-living and writing the past with the multiple narrative voices in mind was a difficult and painful experience that also doubled as healing" (p. 7). I recognize this doubling of pain and healing in my own life writing.

Being human means being vulnerable. Being human means we are born into certain death. It is the deal of life: our one guaranteed certainty. Yet we fear the uncertainty of the when and the where and the how of death. It makes us feel vulnerable. When we face our own illness or the illness of a loved one, when we hear the death of someone we knew intimately or someone we never met but with whom we share age or circumstance, we feel that vulnerability profoundly. My year with cancer was a constant awareness of vulnerability as I practised surrendering to treatment and surrendering to uncertainty. The years following cancer have remained vulnerable—now I must practise surrendering to recovery and surrendering to ongoing uncertainty. Both have challenges. Now when my chest aches, when I feel tired, when

I worry about missing out on my children growing up, or when I imagine how I would feel if cancer came back, I feel vulnerable. So, lucky me, I keep being offered more opportunities to practise vulnerability. I am newly aware that this is a lifelong offering for all of us.

"Rushing River Realizations" is a piece I wrote in my journal in late January 2014. I had already had a mastectomy and I was mid-way through my six rounds of chemotherapy. On this particular day, I began to explore my dilemmas around writing about my cancer experiences. Despite my uncertainties, I decided to write a narrative account of a time that I had been avoiding facing for five months. I was afraid, like Cameron (1998) suggested, that if I wrote about the time I decided to go to the doctor to have my changing breast checked I would feel more vulnerable. Yet, I was prompted to tell this story because I kept hearing well-intentioned people ask me the same two questions when they heard the news of my diagnosis: (1) Did we catch it early? And (2) How did I know? / What were the signs? Before having been diagnosed with cancer, I am not sure I would have read vulnerability into either or these particular questions. Instead, I would have interpreted the questions filled with care, concern, or a desire for potentially life-saving information. But for me as a cancer patient, these questions evoked deep emotions and hidden doubts. So one deeply frigid winter's afternoon, I sat and re-entered a baking hot summer scene. I showed up to the page thinking of writing as, Cameron (1998) calls it, "an act of listening" (p. 10) She urges:

> Instead of being an act of pontification, writing becomes an act of revelation. This is true for any writer who lets writing write through him. We the writers, as much as any reader, are in or the treat of discovering what comes next. (Cameron, 1998, p. 10)

As I listened to myself tell one version of the story and I let myself transcribe it into my journal, I felt as if I had rendered myself more secure on my re-claimed "piece of turf"

(Cameron, 1998, p. 147). I felt more able to respond compassionately to others and myself when I was asked those inevitable questions.

"Into the Closet"

As I described in the first chapter, I did not expect teaching and learning about anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia with teacher candidates to become my doctoral research project. "Into the Closet" is the story behind how and why I chose to analyze and represent the autoethnographic data from my classroom encounter by writing a closet play—a play that is meant to be read by individuals or small groups, rather than to be performed. I offer a meta-narrative about how, when, and why I engaged in arts-based research practices, which according to Leavy (2009), are:

> methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. (p. 3)

Leavy suggests that these practices are "particularly adept at accessing subjugated perspectives, challenging stereotypes and dominant ideology, raising critical consciousness, fostering empathetic understandings, and building coalitions" (p. ix). The ways in which arts-based researchers choose to explore and share their work can become part of their critical stance. Leavy argues "as researchers, we are often trained to hide our relationship to our work; this is problematic for some, impossible for others. Arts-based research practices allow researchers to share this relationship with the audiences who consume their works" (p. 2). As you have likely gathered by now, I am a researcher (and teacher) who finds it almost impossible to hide my

relationship to my work. “Into the Closet” openly reveals some of my perspectives on the social, political, and personal contexts in which I made decisions about how to make a dramatic and fictionalized representation of my accidental teacher research.

Like Leavy (2009), “I knew that I needed to align my research, writing, and teaching . . . I wanted my work to align with who I am within and beyond the academy” (p. vii). By including pieces like “Into the Closet” into my literary Métissage, I am able to integrate and develop my role as a critical language and literacy teacher educator. As discussed in the previous chapter, many critical literacy theorists and teachers are interested in exploring the generative intersection between New Literacy Studies and social semiotic theories of multimodality. Through this kind of meta-methodological life writing, I can re-think Pahl and Roswell’s (2006) call to “account for the materiality of texts, that is, the way they look, sound, and feel” and to understand “who made the text, why, where, and when” in order to “*see identity and social practice in the materiality of texts”* (p. 2, italics in the original). By considering my own identity and social practices, I am able to invite my readers to explore the material of my texts in a more critical way or to encourage them to think about the identity and social practices in which they engage when they make their own material texts.

Fallen Super Hero

“Fallen Super Hero” is a re-telling of my teaching encounter in comic form. Leggo (2010) sets out a challenge for those engaged in life writing: “Our stories need to be told in creative ways that hold our attention, that call out to us, that startle us, so we know our stories and the stories of others with renewed attentiveness” (p. 68). Throughout my doctoral journey, my advisory committee encouraged me to find ways to tell my stories in creative and startling ways. My desire to try to make comics that could be included in my dissertation came from my

love of reading and viewing in the multi-modal genre of comics and graphic novels. Since Spiegelman's (1986, 1991) publication of the *Maus* series of graphic novels about his parents' memories of the Holocaust met with both popular and academic critical acclaim, the graphic novel or comic genre has proliferated in a variety of social justice topics. In the introduction of *To Teach: The Journey in Comics* (2010), author Ayers and comic artist Alexander-Tanner explain what they believe makes comics or sequential art "a dazzling dance of the dialectic": "Really, it is the movement between the panels that defines it . . . And it's in the gutters—those blank spaces between frames—that every reader's imagination makes connections and invents its own meaning" (pp. xiv-xv). McCloud (1993) theorizes that "despite its unceremonious title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery" of comics, because it is within this space where "human imagination takes two separate images and *transforms* them into a single idea" (p. 66). The gutters become the places where the reader interactively and intuitively imagines all the in-between details of the narrative to make meaning that is entirely specific to that person, at that time, and in that context.

My decision to attempt making graphic narratives or comics as part of my dissertation began as a choice about representation. How could I both show and tell a narrative in a way that would have emotional, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic dimensions (Hansen, 2004)? How could I invite audiences of teachers, teacher educators, and teacher education students to engage in ways that would be most provocative and meaningful for them? My experiences as a reader taught me how I have been provoked and felt called to re-look at an issue through multiple perspectives when I experienced multimodal comics and graphic novels. I wanted to learn more about how the modes of comics create unique possibilities for moving towards social justice. I wondered, were comics or graphic novels one way to help people "bear being

uncomfortable for a while" (Kumashiro, 2010, p. 31)? I believe one of the best ways to try to understand a type of writing or art-making process is simply to jump in, get messy, and begin practising that type of writing or art making. I worked with numerous books that both theorized and taught practical tips (Ayers and Alexander-Tanner, 2010; Eisner, 1985, 2008; McCloud, 1993, 2006: Spiegelman, 2011). I made lots of sketches and drawing. I tried making panels and gutters. I created images, tried speech bubbles, and designed text frames. I lettered, and inked, and played, and practised. I began to understand that the choice to become a sign-maker and author in this mode was far more than just a means for final representation. I also began to understand what Spiegelman (2011) might mean when he writes, "It's about choices being made, of finding what one can tell, what one can reveal, and what one can reveal beyond what one knows one is revealing" (p. 73). Through my attempts to keep the visual icons and the story to its most essential, I came to know my narrative in startling new ways.

***Closet Play*, Act I**

After an earlier venture "Into the Closet" to explore how, when, and why this play came about, readers are now invited to enter into the first act of the play. The first act begins as the teacher educator is confronted by a student who wishes to debrief the previous class on anti-homophobia /anti-transphobia education. Feeling vulnerable, the teacher educator remembers back to why she decided to teach the particular class, how she planned for it, and how the class (from her perspective) unfolded. When I wrote my teaching encounter as a play, I struggled with how many of the details to include from the planning and moment-by-moment facilitation of the class. On the one hand, inclusion of so many details and decisions makes for fairly slow dramatic action. On the other hand, it intentionally provides the thick, rich, slow pace of the teaching process. By giving time and attention to the details and choices, I hope to offer to

others what I crave when I am feeling vulnerable as a teacher: a connection to others who also are muddling through the messy stuff; a sense of knowing that I am not alone in my convictions that formal education should help us confront the uncomfortable and potentially controversial in society so that everyone has a chance to live with love and dignity; and a reassurance that acting on these convictions is hard for other people too, but they bravely keep going, even if they are not quite sure of what they are doing at every given moment. One of the purposes of the play is to show how another professional makes decisions and how teaching unfolds within the unpredictable dynamics of contextual relationships. For teachers or teacher educators who may already teach about sexuality and gender diversity or hope to integrate more LGBTQ* and ally perspectives into their classrooms, this offers one glimpse of how someone else tried to engage in this work for the first time. Yet, it is not presented as a "how to" manual. Instead, the audience is invited to witness the tensions and listen into the inner dialogue of the teacher's assessment of the needs of her students and her own emotional responses.

Translucence

What advice would I give
One
Who feels as I do.
Stark.
Stripped.
Stranded.
What would I say as
Expert
To one who just had her most personal fears
Exposed
To what feels like the
Enemy (yet moments ago felt like a friend).

Don't take it personally.
They don't really mean it.
They see you only as power—not as person.
Keep it in perspective.
It was only one voice—the support was in the silence.

But (there *is* always a but, isn't there?)
But I'm not the expert
(Is that what they can see?)
As I stand translucent
My essence throbs vulnerability.

So (there *is* often a so, isn't there?)
So I ache.
So I weep.
So I question.
So I thicken.
So I strengthen.
So I face the next class.

Will they (I wonder, I dread)
Will they illuminate a new
Fissure of weakness.

2001, Oxford Community School

Rushing River Realizations

From my journal: January 28, 2014

I have cancer. I am a 36-year-old non-smoker, almost-never drinker, in good shape who exercises regularly, eats relatively well, and has almost no breast cancer in the family (except one aunt who has a very rare kind that is not supposed to be genetically linked). So when I tell people I have cancer, there are many different reactions, but one that has been common has been two questions that I find difficult to answer: (1) Did you catch it early? And (2) How did you know? What were the signs?

Gulp. Hmmmmm. (1) Did we catch it early? Probably not. It was a big tumour--over 10 centimetres by the time it, and a few of its nearby, smaller tumour buddies, were surgically removed during the mastectomy of my left breast. The kind of breast cancer I have is infiltrative lobular breast cancer and so it grows not in a clear, hard, definable lump, but rather in a thickening and densifying web of breast fibres. So growth was gradual and more difficult to detect. It may have been growing for up to a decade. So, no, if I am at all honest, we didn't really catch it early. It was pretty deeply rooted.

Then, another gulp. (2) How did I know? What were the signs? This is when I feel my heart beat a bit faster and my face feel flushed. I can tell you distinctly when I decided it was time to go the doctor, but did I know before then? Had I been suspicious a long time in advance? Had I been in pretty serious denial? Did I try to intellectualize away the signals? If I let myself be vulnerable here, holding myself both now and then in gentle loving-kindness, then I can admit that I probably "knew" on some level far longer than would be recommended by doctors before making an appointment. I could go on now and try to understand why I didn't take heed of my intuitions or how I let the arrogance of a certain ego-filled understanding of who I am as a healthy, privileged body somehow overpower the still, quiet

knowing, but I'm quite certain that would neither be loving or kind to myself or helpful or compassionate for others.

I decided it was time to go to the doctors for an examination when we were on our first family camping trip to the most amazing, quintessentially Canadian shield place called Rushing River, Ontario. It was so stunningly beautiful that I felt immediately calmer and more connected than I had in a long time. The summer before our get away had been filled with a revolving door of visitors and crushed within the relentless pace of hosting and parenting, I was trying to work on my dissertation. I had a feeling that the end of my doctoral studies was within my reach, but I was feeling a lot of anxiety, tension, and resistance about the writing process and what it might mean to "finish." As we drove away from Winnipeg, leaving the flat golden prairies behind and wound our way through the land of rocks and trees, I seemed able to break through some of the heavy angst that had set like hard stone around my heart.

It was late August and we were in the midst of a deep heat wave. The temperature was over 30 degrees and even at nights the temperatures were remaining over 20. I am not usually a fan of swimming and avoid cold water, but during this trip I sunk into the water and let my body cool in the clear lake. The lake is filled with rocks that rise out of the water—little islands of rest, many sun-baked turtles. My children delighted in challenging themselves to plunging into the deep and swimming across to the next resting rock. We were surrounded by beauty and we were together with only the four of us. It all felt calmly and clearly right. I was more fully present to my surroundings, my children, my husband, and myself than I had been for a long time.

On our second day at Rushing River, we went to the shop on the main road and rented a canoe for the morning. We wanted to get out on the water before the sun baked us in the

afternoon. We returned to our campsite, gathered what we would need for a few hours on the water, and then went to where the canoe would be dropped off for us. We got the canoe into the water and since it was already scorching, we jumped in with just our life jackets, bathing suits, and hats. We began to paddle through the dark, clear, green water, past rocky shores, and first across the lake to another beach. We got out and took a swim. I made my husband take a picture of me with our kids. "I want a photograph to prove I swam in a lake with them at least once during their childhoods," I joked. "Plus, I splurged on this new bathing suit, so we should document it, too."

It was true. A few weeks before I had gone bathing suit shopping. Frustrated with my aging, changing, Mom body, I decided to treat myself to two new bathing suits. I was a bit more daring and chose suits that were more revealing up top than I would usually choose. I figured the way I felt about my cleavage wasn't going to get better as I aged, so I better be accepting of my body now. In the revealing and frightening lights and 3-way mirrors of the changing room, the noticeable changes in the appearance and texture of my left breast could not be ignored. Yet, I thought I was being brave and bold and beautiful buying the suits. I pushed away my panic and the logic that I should go to the doctor to check out my changing and hardening left breast. Perhaps, I justified, I am just showing the tension I am feeling about my dissertation. Perhaps my heart is heavy. I have too much on my chest.

I don't know whether it was my words about wanting a photo to remind our children that Mom had swam in a lake with them, or the days wearing a bathing suit, or the not flattering light of changing in a green tent or a campground comfort station, but something was beginning to shift it me.

After our swim, we returned to the canoe. I was in front, the kids in the middle, my love in the back. We settled into an easy rhythm. We slipped across the surface of the lake, past many islands. We had packed a snack and shared our intention to make a stop when we found just the right island for us. We found it. Right beside a slightly larger island, there was a tiny, baby island. A small channel separated the two, so we carefully navigated our way to the edge of a rock. Steadying ourselves, we got off and climbed onto the island. There were a few trees, lots of rocks, and some shallow dipping pools for our feet. We grabbed our snacks and drinks, ate, laughed, and explored. It felt like there could not be a more perfect place or a more perfect moment.

Then in stunningly calm clarity, I listened to the small, gentle voice speaking within me. I want to have a moment like this again. I want more summers in this place, with these people. This should not be one-time memory. I need to have my breast examined as soon as we get back to the city. It didn't panic me or ruin the calm perfection of the moment. It was just simple and clear. I needed to see a doctor if I wanted to return to this place and be there for these people.

We continued our camping experience. It all seemed heightened to me. My children's faces as they slept in the tent, the smell of campfire smoke, the sweet taste of s'mores. On a deep level, I think this is when I came to knowing, or accepting the knowing I had been avoiding.

Into the Closet

When I was writing my doctoral candidacy exams, I began to explore "the magic of what if" (Norris, 2000, p. 41), a process often used in drama classrooms to encourage learners to create new scenarios, characters, and to imagine beyond what is bound to the realistic. I began to ask myself "what if" questions during this intensive writing period in order to see what might open within my thinking: what if I crafted my response to one of the questions as a play? What if I wrote this play not a production to be performed, but as a script to be read? What if I integrated various ways of "staging" writing (Richardson, 2000)? What if instead of focusing on whether the writing would realistically or aesthetically succeed if staged for a live audience, I allowed myself the freedom to explore the visual, stylistic, and semiotic possibilities of a *performative writing* space? Since I had explored a variety of critical arts-based methods within my doctoral course assignments, I had developed a certain awareness of the precedents of combining research data with dramatic writing or performance. Leavy (2009) defines ethnodrama as "the writing up of research findings in dramatic or script form" that "may or may not be performed" (p. 144). Saldaña (2005) further describes the process:

> An ethno*drama,* the written script, consists of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected through interviews, participant observation field notes, journal entries, and/or print and media artifacts such as diaries, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, and court proceedings . . . this is dramatizing the data. (p. 2)

Richardson (2000) explains that ethnographic drama "can blend realist, fictional, and poetic technique; reconstruct the sense of an event from multiple 'as-lived' perspectives; allow the conflicting voices to all be heard, relieving the researcher of having to be judge and arbiter" (p. 13). Amongst others, researchers such as Conquergood (1985, 1998), Denzin (2003), Ellis and

Bochner (1991, 1996), Fels (2008), Krieger (1991), Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994), Paget (1990), Pelias (1999; 2005), Richardson (1997), Spry (2001), and Trinh (1989) have used performative or "mixed genre productions" (Richardson, 2000, p. 14) to explore their research. Deciding to write one of my exam responses as a script changed how I was able to engage with the material. As I crafted theories and ideas into characters, imagined a setting, and created a plot, the ideas began to take on their own life and my writing, in turn, became a more lively practice.

In the months following the candidacy exam, I began to shift my thinking to how I would re-focus my research to create an ethical and meaningful teacher inquiry around my first out-as-an-ally teaching encounter. I went through many stages in thinking about how to proceed. I considered whether I could or should invite the students who had been in my class to become participants in a retrospective research study of the teaching incident. I felt concerned that if I invited students to co-participate in the study I would not be able to find the right balance to voice their reflections and insights, while still practising and documenting my own reflexive process. I worried about whether or not it would be ethical to investigate the encounter even if I focused on only my own perspective if my students might be identified or affected by my study. After considerable struggle, I settled on an autoethnographic approach to my research and I learned more about relational ethics (see the first chapter). I began to work and re-work the narrative I had written for my candidacy exam. In the exam I had provided pseudonyms to protect the students, but as I continued to further work with the narrative, I began to add more changes that I hoped would offer more anonymity for the individuals in my class. I changed gender of speakers, I made sure any references to the institution I was teaching were omitted, and I sometimes shifted who said what in my description of the talking circle. Yet I was still feeling unsettled and unsatisfied that I was moving beyond what I already thought I knew about the story.

After writing many drafts of prose narratives of my teaching encounter, I was feeling stuck. Theoretically I felt inspired by Davies (2011) ideas of experimental writing, but in practice I did not quite know how to go forward with it. Like Davies, I knew I needed to play with form if I wanted to move beyond what was already known in my teaching story. I returned to the generative process of asking, "what if?" (Norris, 2000). What if I experimented by writing about my lived experiences in the classroom in the playful form of an ethnodrama? What if, just like during my candidacy exam, I knew I wanted to *stage* a play in writing, but I did not want to *perform* a play with live actors? While in the process of thinking in this open-ended way, I learned a wonderful literary term for plays that are written with the intention of being read (either solitarily or in small groups), but are not intended or designed to be performed. These particular plays are known as *closet plays.* So with a certain sense of serendipitous wonder, I asked, what if I wanted to write about homophobia in pre-service teacher education and I could do so in a form called a *closet play*? I no longer felt stuck.

The name for the form became a metaphor for the content itself. As I began to work with the metaphor of being in the closet and coming out of the closet (and allow the metaphor to work on me), I re-connected with details and aspects of the story that had begun to emerge in other narrative or visual tellings. In one of my first forays into comic making, I vividly pictured myself getting ready to teach on the morning of my anti-homophobia lesson. In my nervousness before class began, I went to my closet, opened the doors, and carefully and consciously chose a flowing purple cardigan. I thought finding just the right outfit would keep me calm, help me look professional, and send the right message of solidarity with the movement for gender and sexuality equity (because I somehow had it in my head that purple was a colour representing LGBTQ* pride). By visualizing this moment of suiting myself up in a professional costume (or maybe

Brown (2012) would call this "professional armour"), I imagined myself getting ready to become a super hero—an invulnerable figure who would come to save the day. Through the practice of re-entering the story and paying attention to how much I relied on choosing a cardigan to find my courage, I could also recognize how no costume could protect me from my own vulnerabilities. I began to sketch the story of a fallen teacher super hero. The material for my comic both figuratively and literally came out of my closet. Discovering I could try re-thinking and re-presenting this story in the experimental form of a closet play invited me to get into the closet metaphor again. What would I notice now? What might materialize in the form of a closet play?

As you may recall from the short narrative of the teaching encounter I tell in the first chapter, the first class after I lectured about anti-homophobia was the last school day before Halloween. At least half of my students came to class in costume. Although I remember wearing the purple cardigan the day of the first class, I honestly do not remember what I wore on the day others were in costume. I cannot seem to remember whether I wore a costume of some sort or whether I wore my regular teacher clothes. However, I do vividly remember the student who sat next to me when we moved into a talking circle was wearing a Wonder Woman costume. Many of the other students wore clothing, masks, makeup, or carried props that would help them take on a different role as part of the playful spirit of the season. As a researcher who wanted to write both *ethically* to protect the identities of students and *experimentally* to move beyond a fixed experience, a classroom full of *costumed characters* seemed to have a lot of potential for a *closet play*.

In order to represent my autoethnographic data as a play, I first needed to create a cast of characters. Connecting to my previous practices with comic making, I knew I wanted the teacher to wear a superhero costume. Remembering my student's striking Wonder Woman costume, I

began to connect this hero's name to my love of the wonder that propels teacher inquiry. Yet I began to wonder whether I would impinge some sort of copyright legislation if I used this well-known superhero's name. What if I played with the name a little and found a way to evoke the image, while inviting new possibilities? What if I called her Wonder(ing) Woman? Might her costume have the symbol of a question mark? Would bracketing the (–ing) show that living alongside some aspects of the confident, awe-inspiring hero, there co-exists aspects of self and world questioning for this teacher? When I chose the character's name, imagined her in costume, and set her on a stage, I suddenly felt lighter. I could now think of the teacher as a character, so I could gain some distance from myself. I could see that although this is *my* teaching story, it also could be *someone else's* teaching story. I could think of how Granger (2011) writes:

> Sometimes one person's remembered story, or interpretation of that story, can inform and even nourish another's memory, story, or interpretation, even if on their surfaces they are quite distinct. This is my first wish: that the moments I recall, narrate, and interpret may open up possibilities for others to think in similar ways about different moments in education, or in different ways about similar moments, or even about different moments in different ways—because sometimes there are surprises. (pp. 11-12)

By creating a teacher character based on, but moving beyond myself, I could construct a text that could invite others to think about similar and different moments in teaching and learning in potentially surprising ways. Granger (2011) further argues:

> By involving the reader, and everything that individual brings to a reading, an autobiographical or autoethnographic narrative is not only a field for the re-creation and re-enactment of past moments in the writer's and the reader's worlds, but a potentially

> rich breeding ground for ideas and questions: a place from which we begin to think ideas and theorize issues. (p. 56)

In an attempt to create a play that would re-create and re-enact past moments with the goal to "think ideas and theorize issues," my choices of how I represented student characters became critical.

Remembering and imagining my students in costumes opened up all sorts of playful possibilities, inviting me to go in new directions with the narrative. As I tried to remember what my students were wearing on the day of the Talking Circle, I kept picturing the costumes of the iconic, 1970s disco band Village People: biker, cowboy, military officer, police officer, construction worker, and First Nations person in a ceremonial headdress (a character I discuss in more detail later). I liked the idea of playing with these particular characters and costumes because many readers would instantly recognize them as Village People and associate the band with its activist/advocacy/awareness role within the Gay Pride movement. I also liked the idea because the readers of the play can imagine any of these costumed characters as male, female, transgender, or all of the above in subsequent or same readings. Gender intentionally becomes muddied. Within the script, when I needed to refer to a character as "him or her" or "she or he," I offer both pronouns to draw attention to the complexity and pervasiveness of gender.

I also was able to use the socio-culturally iconic characters to become a way to theme or group comments articulated by many different individuals in the actual class or by students in classes I have taught in subsequent years. The stereotypical costumes allowed certain ideas and themes to surface in ways that suddenly seemed more obvious. For example, I was able to look at ideas that were expressed by students that seemed particularly to reflect the experience of rural teacher education students and thought it might be effective and provocative to assign at

least some of these lines to the cowboy/cowgirl character. In a similar way, I thought about what comments seemed to have a policing effect on the group or myself as teacher, comments that seemed to be following a strict, almost military line, or comments that seemed particularly constructive and assigned them to the character with the appropriate costume. Yet, I did not want the costumes and stereotypes to produce only flat and simplified caricatures, but rather I wanted to try to strive to give some complexity and contradictions to individual characters, just like there are complexities and contradictions to the teacher education students themselves. For example, a character that may have seemed to be fairly negative in the discussion suddenly says something that is supportive of what s/he may have been dismissed earlier.

I found decisions surrounding two characters particularly "troubling" (Kumashiro, 2010) in a much-needed way. I knew I had my first problem when I tried to assign a name to one of the characters. Biesta (2010) addresses the importance of how we name those we teach:

> It does indeed matter how we refer to those who are subject to education. This is not because language has some kind of mysterious power, but more simply because words are connected to other words, so that using one particular word leads more easily to some words than others. (p. 540).

He further argues that these connections articulate and shape relationships "between saying, ways of doing, and ways of being. And that is why our words matter" (p. 540). I was aware that my words matter, so I struggled to name one of the costumed characters. Should I write Aboriginal person? First Nations person? Native American? None of these terms seemed even remotely accurate or culturally sensitive. I believed a costumed character that reinforces potentially harmful stereotypes should not have the same name that identifies individuals from complex living cultures. I did not want to reinforce a stereotype, but rather interrogate and

trouble it for myself and for future readers. It mattered a lot to me how I would name this character, so I had a troubling dilemma.

When I began writing my play, I was part way through reading Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (2012). Within this relationship between what I was reading and what I was writing, I felt particularly alert to how much the personal and political naming and cultural imagining/representing of Aboriginal people matters in North America. King (2012) writes:

> When I was a kid, Indians were Indians. Sometimes Indians were Mohawks or Cherokees or Crees or Blackfoot or Tlingits or Seminoles. But mostly they were Indians. Columbus gets blamed for the term, but he wasn't being malicious. He was looking for India and thought he had found it. He was mistaken, of course, and as time went on, various folks and institutions tried to make the matter right. Indians became Amerindians and Aboriginals and Indigenous People and American Indians. Lately, Indians have become First Nations in Canada and Native Americans in the United States, but the fact of the matter is that there has never been a good collective noun because there was never a collective to begin with. (pp. xii-xiii)

In the late 1970s, the band the Village People decided to represent the North American "Indian" as a character in a costume that was a mix and match from Hollywood-style film representations: a large feathered headdress, war paint, no shirt, some beads or bone necklaces, and a loin cloth. King writes about how Hollywood created this pervasive, stereotypical image of the Indian:

> Indians were made for film. Indians were exotic and erotic. All those feathers, all that face paint, the breast plates, the bone chokers, the skimpy loincloths, not to mention the

> bows and arrows and spears, the war cries, the galloping horses, the stern stares, and the threatening grunts . . . . The only thing film had to do was to collect such materials and cobble them into a series of functioning clichés. (p. 34)

King further argues that "North American popular culture is littered with savage, noble, and dying Indians, while in real life we have Dead Indians, Live Indians, and Legal Indians" (p. 52). While the Village People's "Native American" costume could partially be read as representing a savage or noble Indian from popular culture, it can also be read as King's idea of a Dead Indian, which he describes as "the stereotypes and clichés that North America has conjured up out of experience and out of its collective imaginings and fears" (p. 52). I think the term "Dead Indian" is perhaps a more appropriate fit to name how the Village People costume conjures Hollywood. The costume is not trying to represent real, living, present-day Aboriginal people, but rather evoke the imagined, romanticized, and feared notions that have been created in an attempt to simplify the messy storyline of colonization. Yet this term is very uncomfortable for me. I am a white settler Canadian who lives in what Maclean's magazine (Macdonald, January 22, 2015) has described as the most racist city in Canada. I cringe both when I write and then read "Dead Indian" on the page of my closet play. It is one thing for Thomas King, who is Aboriginal, to use this term. But should I? But what are my alternatives? Omit the troublesome character because s/he is too difficult to name? Too awkward to have staged on the page? Too provocative of my own inherent racism? Or gloss over the name, write anything, and hope no one questions me on my choices?

King (2012) argues that "North America no longer *sees* Indians" (p. 53), instead what it sees are "bits of cultural debris—authentic and constructed" (p. 54):

> Whatever cultural significance they may have for Native peoples, full feather headdresses and beaded buckskins are, first and foremost, White North America's signifiers of Indian authenticity. Their visual value at ceremonies in Los Angeles or Ottawa is—as the credit card people say—priceless. (p. 55)

I believe that many Canadian educators, myself included at times, adopt this "priceless" analogy when they integrate visual signifiers of the Dead Indian into their curriculum. If there is a representation of a tipi, beading, or feathered headdress, then "Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives" can be checked off the provincially mandated "to do" list without really struggling with the troubling (Kumashio, 2010) relationships of privilege, power, historical context, and contemporary pluralistic experiences.

When I began to think about naming and placing this "Dead Indian" character onto the set of a teacher education classroom, it seemed necessarily provocative to me. It seemed necessarily uncomfortable and awkward to have a now antiquated, yet still meaning-laden image embodied on the stage. Instead of just talking in abstract ways about Aboriginal ways of knowing and being, this particular costume embodies a hyper-stereotypical perspective. The character becomes a presence that is complicated, living, and difficult to overlook. When I imagined the play, I did not think the costume would necessarily need to be worn by a First Nations or Métis person, but in the content of the play I do have this character "come out" as First Nations and explicitly address the discomforting irony of wearing the costume. In my experiences with teacher education I have had a few experiences where self-identified Métis or First Nations students talk or write about how they have felt a weight of responsibility and expectation to give the "Aboriginal Perspective" within their faculty of education classes, while all the time negotiating the racism and ignorance of some of their classmates and instructors. I

have also often had teacher education students connect their experiences with racism to their understandings of homophobia as a way, I believe, for them to begin to respond with empathy. Although I acknowledge that I am still troubled by the name "Dead Indian," I believe both the name and the costume has potential as a powerful, problematic, and provocative embodied reminder of the intersecting stories of social, historical, and cultural injustices that live within the experiences of pre-service teacher education.

My other difficult decision was choosing how to represent an "out" or LGBTQ*-identified teacher education. I wondered whether I should have one character represent the LGBTQ* teacher education student consistently throughout the play or whether, since I practice life writing within a post-structuralist paradigm, I should share and shift the queer perspective amongst all the characters. Allowing different characters to voice the LGBTQ* perspectives at different times throughout the play might make it difficult to follow the plot of the story, but this experimental choice might invite questions about the false dichotomy between hetero- and homosexual individuals. I wondered if designing the play so all the characters would take different moments where they are the LGBTQ*-identified teacher candidate could build empathy. Would this intentionally muddling move create a sense that homophobia and transphobia is not a concern for just one individual, but it is the story of and in all of us? We each internalize homophobia and we each have queer moments (Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007). Would it deepen the message that discrimination against sexual and gender minorities is not an issue only for those directly connected to the LGBTQ* community, but rather it is an issue for *all* of us because we are all human beings who have the right to love and dignity?

In a post-structuralist, thinking-through-theory sort of way, I liked the idea of all of the characters playing the part of the "out" teacher candidate, but it did not seem to be a representational choice that rang true to my lived experiences with LGBTQ* teacher education students. LGBTQ* teacher education students are a minority in Canadian teacher education programs. Self-identified or "out" LGBTQ* teacher education students often find themselves as the only, or one of only a few, sexual or gender minorities in each of their education classes. This certainly has been my experience working in faculties of education in three different institutions within a prairie province. I have often only had one or two self-identified "out" teacher education students in each of my classes. I have worried that these individuals might feel pressure to become the "voice" of the LGBTQ* community or feel very visible in their minority position. In my writing, if I chose one composite character to consistently play the role of an out teacher education student, then this hyper-visibility would become more evident. So, I decided the biker would become "the" LGBTQ*-identified character throughout the play. The biker was chosen mainly out of a practical process where I thought through what the other stereotyped costumes might offer in terms of thematically analyzing my students' comments. As I describe earlier, during my coding process I could make clear links between certain types of comments that teacher education students made to certain costumes that might represent a certain theme. I felt I had a less direct link from comments said in the circle to the stereotype of a biker. Yet the biker certainly evokes a certain image of rebellion or resistance to mainstream culture. There is a large, established, and vibrant biker culture filled with great diversity within it. Perhaps this rebel character might represent how out teacher education students traverse between the mainstream culture that is reified in their faculties of education and their LGBTQ* communities within and beyond work and school.

Once I chose how to represent and name all of my characters, the rest of the play became an experiment in how I could stage both the internal and external dynamics of the classroom. In the first act of the play, I wanted to draw attention to how I chose to have a lecture dominate my teaching style and set limitations on how the students could interact with the content and each other. I knew I could play with some visual modes that were available to me because of the affordances of a closet play. Since I was writing this script with the intention for it to be read from a page, I could use text boxes and typography to offer the reader the mock experience of reading from a screen, just like my teacher education students read from a screen when my presentation was projected to them. I could offer three entire poems by John J. Guiney Yallop (2010) to become reflective spaces, just as I read them aloud to my class to offer pause and perspective. I also could try to use staging effects, such as a mirror prop, tableau "freezing", and spotlights to allow for internal monologues on the part of the teacher. Stage directions allowed me to show and tell some of the dynamics at play in the classroom. These techniques and this new imagining of characters allowed me to write experimentally and to move beyond what I previously thought I knew about my classroom encounter. I thought of how Davies (2011) encourages writers to become *emergent* through the process of writing:

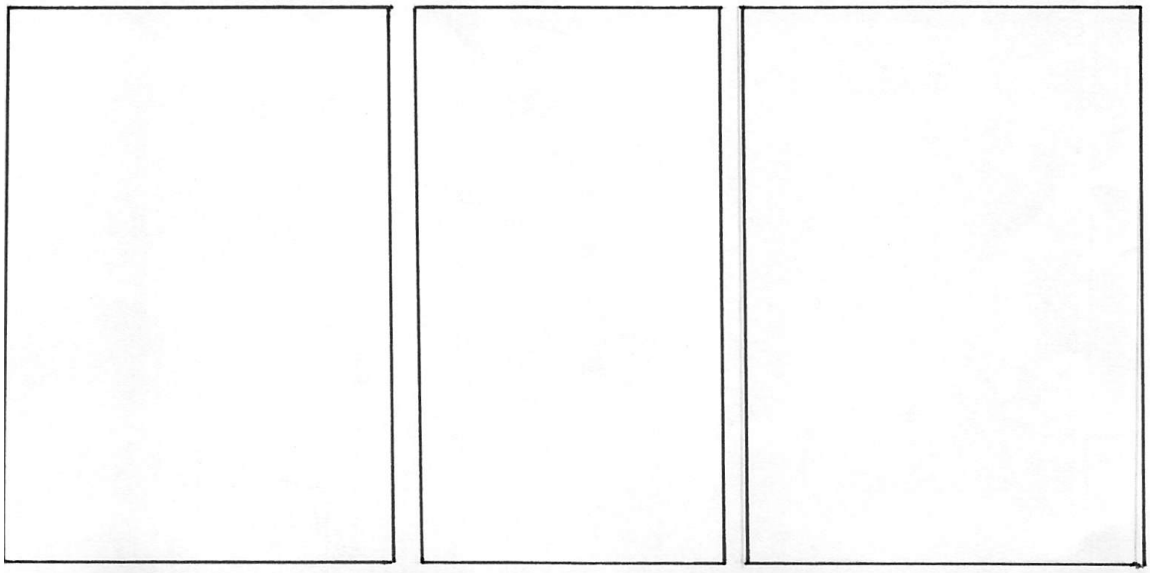
> As a writer, then, I myself must be *emergent* in the act of writing and not separate from it. I will be not so much *represented* in the text as emerging co-extensive with the text and with the place I am writing . . . . To engage in the act of writing, I must be fully present and connected, and, *at the same time,* leave behind what went before—the origin, the cause, the subject "I" which was imagined to pre-exist in the writing. My self-conscious "I", with all its pleasures, it preciousness, and its predictability, must be abandoned in favour of an emergent subject in process, a subject that is a reflection of some aspect of

> the whole, a singular perspective of the whole, a place where thoughts can happen. (p. 37)

Going back into my teaching encounter through the closet play allowed me to leave behind some of what I thought I had known before. It gave me space to feel vulnerable and discover how to become an "emergent subject in process." Now, onto and into and out of the closet we go.


FALLEN SUPER HERO
A TALE OF A TEACHER IN CRISIS
AN ORDINARY, EVERY DAY, BUT EXTREMELY NERVOUS TEACHER EDUCATOR GETS READY TO TEACH ABOUT HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA TO FUTURE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS. EMERGING FROM HER CLOSET IN THE PERFECT PURPLE CARDIGAN, OUR TEACHER EDUCATOR CHANNELS HER...
PRAIRIE
... INNERALLY SUPER HERO. SHE COULD BE BRAVE. SHE COULD LEAP GRAIN ELEVATORS IN A SINGLE BOUND. SHE COULD SAVE THE DAY!

TO BE CONTINUED...



Closet Play

CAST OF CHARACTERS
TEACHER……dressed as WONDER(ING) WOMAN
STUDENTS…… dressed in "The Village People" costumes
adaptable for any gender performance:
COWBOY/COWGIRL
BIKER
POLICE OFFICER
CONSTRUCTION WORKER
"DEAD INDIAN"[2]
SAILOR

ACT 1, *Scene 1*

The stage is set to evoke a classroom space. A teacher's desk is covered with pens, papers, a computer, projector, and a plastic puffy fish toy. A backpack hangs on a chair behind the teacher's desk. Six chairs are arranged facing the teacher's desk. A large whiteboard faces the audience and student chairs. Downstage left a chair sits besides a full-length mirror on a stand. When the lights come up, the students sit facing the teacher's desk. The teacher is dressed as WONDER(ING) WOMAN, her costume shares the red and blue glamour of another well known superhero, but features a question mark symbol. She perches on the edge of her desk facing her students.

POLICE OFFICER. *(With edge of tension or even accusation to his/her voice)*

Are we going to debrief the film from last class *at all* today?

The other students begin to give each other meaningful glances, shift uncomfortably in their chairs, or stare at the teacher.

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[2] This name comes from King's (2012) description of the "Dead Indian" as "the stereotypes and clichés that North America has conjured up out of experience and out of its collective imaginings and fears" (p. 52). For further discussion of the naming of this character, see "Into the Closet".

WONDER(ING) WOMAN. *(Looks at the student with a mixture of surprise and alarm.)*

Sure, sure we can. We, uh, we were going to sit in a circle for the next activity anyway, so . . . yeah, that would work for some sharing. Let's move our chairs into a circle now and, um, I'll just grab a pen and my notebook.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN searches through the piles on her desk while students stand up to move their chairs A spotlight is directed on WONDER(ING) WOMAN as she directly addresses the audience.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Why won't my hands stop shaking? And why can't I find a normal blue or black pen? I packed at least three this morning. Why can I only find this ridiculous orange gel pen?

She stops her frantic searching and becomes very still and quiet. She faces the audience and lets out a fast, jagged breath.

I'm totally freaking out here. The energy just shifted. What I am about to hear? Why I am only hearing it now? Seriously, we're already half way through class. Are the students upset? Angry? Or am I just overly sensitive because last class felt like such high-risk teaching?

Takes a deeper breath and more slowly releases it.

Deep breath. Just take the orange gel pen, grab a notebook, and go *listen*.

Lights dim.

Act 1, Scene 2

WONDER(ING) WOMAN is on stage, standing in front of the full-length mirror. The spotlight is on her as she adjusts her costume and fluffs her cape. The students sit in a straight row of

chairs that face away from the audience. They remain still and silent, present but in the dark, for most of this scene.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I didn't really expect to find myself here, just a few days before Halloween, getting ready to teach two sections of 30-plus teacher education students four mornings a week. Late last August, if someone had asked me where I'd be in two months I'd have answered that I would be immersed, possibly even drowning, in my doctoral candidacy exams. But after a flurry of emails and phone calls on the last day of August, I agreed to postpone my candidacy exams and pick up teaching two sections of "Literacy Across the Curriculum" from a faculty member who had to take an emergency health leave. I was determined to use this practical, hands-on gift of teaching to think about whether the "big ideas" dancing around in my head after a summer of exam-prep reading could become integrated into actual lived classroom experiences.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN moves to the teacher's desk and flicks on the projector.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

When I designed my course outlines, I wanted a quote from Maxine Greene to be the very first thing my students encountered:

The screen behind her lights with the projected quote, which she reads aloud.

> Teachers have their own crafts, their own repertoires, their own modes of artistry… You also have a life project, a way of being in the world through which and by means of which you define yourself as a person. That project is teaching, and if you are like me, it is a lifelong quest, a lifelong project. Like the artists, we are always in process, always exploring our texts, our raw materials, always seeking ways of reaching others and moving others to come alive, to think about their thinking, to create meanings, to transform their lived worlds. What happens here, I think, what ought to happen is not simply planning for the school year, not simply pondering new curricula (important though all this is). There is something else: a reaching out on your part, an authentic reaching out to become different. I mean different in the sense of having more languages at hand for expressing what it is you have to say. I mean different in the sense of knowing what it is to let your imagination play, to look at things as if they could be otherwise, to open windows in the ordinary and banal. (p. 70)

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

The ideas of encouraging a "life project" of teaching that could "open windows in the ordinary and banal," both for my students and for me, seemed exactly what I wanted to strive for in a course that explores how language(s) and literacies have powerful and profound effects on the lives, relationships, and identities of teachers, learners, families and communities. So far, I feel my students and I have shared many processes that have allowed our imaginations "to play" and challenged us "to look at things as if they could be otherwise." This is especially true of the first writing assignment that directly influenced my decision to plan and teach an especially intense lesson.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN pats a stack of papers on her desk and clicks the screen to the next slide.

Literacies in Life: The Story Project

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I named the first assignment "Literacies in Life: The Story Project." The purpose of this assignment was to explore how teaching and learning experiences, including our tensions and conflicts, are mediated through languages and literacies. There were three parts to the assignment.

What is your story?

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

First, students were asked, "What is your story?" They were given an opportunity to tell an incident when languages and/or literacies created a sense of tension for them as teachers of learners.

What if your story was told from another perspective?

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Second, they were challenged to empathetically imagine how someone else might tell about the same incident. They were encouraged to re-tell the same story from the perspective of a student, teacher, parent, administrator, or another imagined other.

So what now?

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Finally, they were asked, "So what now?" After telling and re-telling, the students were asked to share what questions and wonderings emerged for them about teaching, learning,

language(s), and/or literacies and to imagine how they might teach and learn differently now because of what they interpreted or bumped up against in the story.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN begins to pick up assignments from the pile and flip through them. Soft lighting now comes onto the students who remain sitting in chairs with their backs facing the audience.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

The tellings, retellings, and accompanying analyses that emerged from these assignments were emotional, insightful, and many times, deeply raw. I was invited to know the individuals in my classes in a more intimate way through each personal tale, but I also gained a wider view of the terrain of teaching and learning both within and beyond classrooms at all levels of formal education. I felt saddened and sickened by the number of incidents in which my students recalled:

As each student speaks, s/he straddles his or her chair to directly face the audience. After each has spoken, s/he drops his/her head and freezes into a new tableau.

"DEAD INDIAN".

Racism.

SAILOR.

Sexism.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER.

Ableism.

COWBOY/COWGIRL.

Stereotyping.

POLICE OFFICER.

Bullying.

BIKER.

Homophobia.

ALL STUDENTS. *(Heads remain down.)*

Hate.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Although most of the teacher education students remained hopeful for and passionately committed to building safe and supportive spaces for their future students to learn, many of the stories came from ugly places where power had been abused. Languages of hate ripped irreparable holes into the fabric of their education experiences. As I read and cried, responded and laughed, marked and mulled, I felt a responsibility to *act*, to *care*, and to *teach* (Noddings, 1988, 1992, 2002) about these critical incidents that so many of my students had witnessed or experienced.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN stands up and puts some articles and books into the backpack that is hanging on the back of her chair.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Drawing upon my personal and academic interests, I started to plan a class that I decided to call:

Addressing Languages of Hate: Teaching Anti-Homophobia Education to High School Teachers

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I began by emailing a teacher I had seen at a conference who had shared his experience of making a film about homophobia with his high school students. I asked if I could purchase a copy of the film to show to my teacher candidates. The teacher was incredibly obliging.

As I waited for the film to arrive, I dug out articles about teaching with a feminist lens and addressing homophobia in classrooms. I wanted to make sure I taught with sensitivity, care, and a very clear plan. I knew that many of my students came from pretty conservative religious backgrounds *(COWBOY/COWGIRL and SAILOR stand),* but I really had no idea where everyone stood on this issue. I did know that I had one, and only one, teacher education student who self-identified as an "out" educator *(BIKER stands).*

The standing students sit back down as WONDER(ING) WOMAN puts her backpack over her shoulder and moves the chair beside her desk to downstage center. As she continues to tell her story, she also grabs the chair from beside the mirror and pushes it beside the other chair. Her row of two chairs is now in front of the row of students who continue to sit facing forward, heads down. She unpacks her backpack and places papers, laptop, and a bottle of Diet Pepsi on the seat next to her. The screen flashes to an image of an airport.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

The film arrived the day before I flew to Toronto to present at a conference. I hoped a few days alone in a hotel would give me a chance to do some needed preparation for the class. Most of the days at the conference were extremely full, but as I participated in sessions and listened to research and personal stories, I became even more passionately committed to teaching about anti-homophobia strategies for high school teachers.

At the end of the conference, I had several hours before my flight was scheduled to leave. I headed to the airport early for a place to sit, free access to the internet, and some uninterrupted time to plan my lecture. I don't usually lecture, but I remembered a presenter from a conference explain that when she presents anti-homophobia policies to all the staff in her school division she focuses on human rights, gives lots of information, but does not leave a lot of room for discussion. I recalled her saying that discussions only further entrenched personal biases and created divisions within groups, which took away from the purpose of the training. The presenter's purpose was different than mine—she was educating staff about the policies of her district, while I was opening the issue to teacher candidates. But frankly, I was a bit freaked out. I could imagine scenarios where students said hateful, harmful things that divided their cohort beyond repair. If I talked and gave information, I believed I might have a bit more control over the direction and tone of the conversation.

Once I found my gate, I found a row of seats overlooking the tarmac. I took out my laptop and watched the student-made film for the first time since I had seen it at the conference. It was as powerful as I remembered—high school students providing opinions, in their own language—and doing so in a local context.

Spotlight now focuses on the BIKER. S/he is sitting in a row with the other students with his/her head down.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I thought about the self-identified "out" educator. I had already written to him/her to give a "heads up" *(BIKER raises his/her head and looks at the back of WONDER(ING) WOMAN)* that I would be teaching about this issue. I asked him/her if there was anything

s/he would like to contribute or anything s/he thought I should consider, but I also wrote to try to explain that I didn't expect him/her to speak on behalf of the LGBTQ* community. I tried to encourage him/her to share in ways that felt comfortable at the time. S/he hadn't responded, but I knew I would have a chance to see him/her before I taught the class. I hoped s/he would feel comfortable and not too "in the spotlight" *(BIKER moves on this cue to stand on his/her chair)* to provide "the gay and lesbian voice" for the class.

BIKER sits down and the spotlight is turned off him/her. WONDER(ING) WOMAN begins packing her bag as she speaks.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

By the time the airplane landed, my rainbow bright Powerpoint was ready. I felt I could proclaim with a false bravado, "Ready or not, here I come," while simultaneously pleading, "Do no harm. Please, let me do no harm."

WONDER(ING) WOMAN picks up the chair and carries it with her back to the teacher's desk. She sits down, takes out her laptop, and begins to type. She looks up and resumes speaking. Students look up in her direction.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Before I met with students, I posted on our class website my intentions to teach about anti-homophobia education. Using suggestions from the articles I'd read, I outlined some "safety nets" I would put in place for the class, wanting my students to know in advance that they had freedom to leave and take breaks as needed with no questions asked. I assured them that we would all be in different places about this issue and reminded them that we would need to speak and listen respectfully. I let them know

there would be resources posted on the class website for their digestion following the class. I encouraged students to talk to me by email or by home phone before or after class if any issues arose. As soon as I posted the announcements, I felt a public commitment to follow through and teach the lessons. There would be no chickening out to save my vulnerable sessional instructor's skin now.

Lights dim.

Act 1, Scene 3

WONDER(ING) WOMAN sits at the teacher desk marking. BIKER walks in holding an article.

BIKER.

Hey! I'm glad I caught you, I wasn't sure if you'd be in today. I thought you might like a copy of this article for our class tomorrow.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN. *(Glancing at the title of the article.)*

Oh, thank you so much. Ahhh, the Canadian homophobia and transphobia climate survey *(Taylor et al., 2011)*—I'm planning to use this tomorrow, so I must be on the right track. You know what?

BIKER.

What?

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I'm ridiculously nervous about teaching tomorrow.

BIKER. *(Grinning)*

Don't worry—it will be fabulous.

Lights dim.

Act 1, Scene 4

The stage is once again set as a classroom. The students' chairs are arranged in rows. The whiteboard screen is visible both to the students and the audience. WONDER(ING) WOMAN stands by the whiteboard. She still wears her superhero costume, including the cape. However, she has a pencil-fit "teacher skirt" and a flowing purple cardigan over top. Students are also in costumes. They come in noisily, laughing, complaining about overwhelming workloads, but also chattering about the content of the day's class. On the screen a rainbow-coloured screen projects statistics about LGBTQ youth.*

WONDER(ING) WOMAN. *(Shaking hands and wavering voice. As soon as she begins an immediate and almost reverent hush falls over the students.)*

I've been feeling nervous about teaching this class—I know it can be risky to talk about issues where people have strong beliefs and emotional ties. When I started planning, I wanted this to be a lesson that might promote positive social change. *(Voice is increasingly steadier.)* I read an article by a woman named Paula Alida Roy (2000) who taught for nearly three decades in New Jersey, working to make her classroom a place where issues of genders and homophobia could be safely explored. Roy describes what she learned about changing school cultures:

> Once I dreamed of grand gestures and sweeping reform movements; after twenty-nine years of hard work, I am convinced that we make change slowly, that resistance constantly pushes back, and that our best hopes reside in constant attention to the small details of daily life: what we say and how we say it; what we teach and how we teach it, and what support we offer colleagues in classrooms and those preparing to teach. (Roy, 2000, p. 62)

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

When I read this a few days ago on the rigid seats in the Pearson airport, I realized that this really is my best hope for today. Although I know there may be push back or resistance, I think we *can* try to be constantly attentive to how we use language—what we say and how we say it. And *I* want to be supportive to you who are preparing to teach. I would love to teach a whole course on "Education and Genders" and I know that one lesson on anti-homophobia education won't nearly get to the complexities of this issue, but I take a bit of comfort that I am part of change, even if it is slower than I might like. I don't usually give you all a lot of time to read during class, but today I want to hand out part of a national "climate survey" that was published in 2011. It was a survey conducted from 2007-2009 of about 3700 high school students across Canada to "investigate what life at school is like for students with a sexual or gender minority status" (Taylor et al., 2011). I want to give you about ten minutes or so to read through these pages. These are yours to keep so feel free to write on them. I want you to think about any of the statistics that stand out or surprise you—things that might match or oppose your experiences in schools as learners and teachers.

Students eagerly begin reading, some shaking their heads as they read, some underlining or highlighting. WONDER(ING) WOMAN circulates amongst the students. COWBOY/GIRL motions for her to come closer.

COWBOY/GIRL. *(Quietly)*

Will you be going over some of these terms? I'm not sure I know all of them.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Oh, right. Yes, of course. Good idea. I know I struggle with some of this language too.

COWBOY/GIRL goes back to reading. Spotlight on WONDER(ING) WOMAN who faces audience directly.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

How stupid am I? Why didn't I think of this in advance? I know many of the students in this classroom are just like this cowboy/girl here and just like me. We grew up in rural settings. I know I sure didn't hear any talk about homosexuality in my school . . . anywhere in my community really. Well, actually there was lots of talk, but it was ugly talk, harsh whispering, reputation-crushing accusations—fags and dykes and "That's so gay," "You're so gay." There was certainly no Gay Straight Alliances. No Pride Parade through my redneck prairie town.

I know some of my students have described their backgrounds, whether rural or urban, as pretty religious and conservative. I should have prepared definitions of terms alongside the reading so no one would feel awkward.

Now I feel rattled. And really uncertain. I get mixed up sometimes on some of these terms too. What's the difference between transsexual and transgender? What initials am I supposed to include when I am talking about the LGBTQ or LGBTTQQ* community? I think my heteronormativity is getting to me. I better go to one of my resources so that I can keep the terms straight. Straight. Crap. I think my privilege is showing.

She goes to a file and then reads aloud to the class printed, official sounding definitions of gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, ally, and two-spirited individuals.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER.

That definition says that two-spirited people were revered by their culture, but that might be too simplistic—often they had a place of at least acceptance in their immediate

community, but there is evidence of torture and mistreatment by some who were caught by outsiders.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN. *(Warmly, with genuine appreciation.)*

Thank you. Yes, I think some of these definitions might be a bit simplistic, but they are a starting point for discussion.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER nods and smiles.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Now, I think we should take a few minutes to talk about the findings in this report. What surprised you? What confirms or contrasts what you've experienced in schools?

Many hands eagerly pop up to begin the conversation.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER.

I guess I'm a little surprised. I mean, I know it can be really bad out there, but some of these statistics are just awful—"70% of all participating students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, reported hearing expressions such as "'that's so gay' everyday in school" (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 15). *(Sighs)* I thought things were improving!

BIKER. *(Jumps in to respond right away)*

Really? You're surprised? These statistics don't surprise me at all. Just the other day I was coming to talk to Wonder(ing) Woman when I heard a group of students, *here* from *this* Faculty singing a song that was bashing gay people. I stopped and approached them and said, "How dare you use that kind of language? I'm homosexual and that song is hurtful to me and my people." It is happening *right here*!

"DEAD INDIAN".

Yeah, I guess I'm not surprised by the statistics either. I think I kind of knew that about students, but this statistic about teachers is pretty sad—"10% of LGBTQ students reported hearing homophobic comments from teachers daily or weekly" (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 15).

WONDER(ING) WOMAN is following along with the conversation, but also is checking her watch and looking concerned about the time.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I've really tried to pack a lot into today's class, so I think I'll be able to hear from one more student before we move on.

POLICE OFFICER. *(Begins reading from the article.)*

*"*One of the most striking findings of our study is that 58% of non-LGBTQ youth find homophobic comments upsetting" (Taylor et al, 2011, p. 26), but that means that 42% do not find it upsetting. That isn't all that promising.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Thanks, that's a great segue into our next part of the lecture. *(Suddenly realizing what she has just said, she looks a little horrified and rushes to clarify.)* Not that it's great to hear that statistic. Not a great statistic at all, but it makes a nice smooth transition to the next part of this class.

The class laughs—easing some of the tension and lightening the mood.

Will I Get into Trouble for Teaching This?

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

A lot of you may be wondering if you can end up in trouble for teaching about homophobia or transphobia in public schools. Let me remind you that this is covered by provincial curriculum documents. It is also part of national and international human rights declarations. You also have a legal obligation to respond to harassment and prejudice in schools. So, knowing that we have every right and a lot of responsibility to talk about these things, let's brainstorm what we think homophobia means.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN shuts off the projector and grabs a board marker pen.

Homophobia

CONSTRUCTION WORKER.

Fear.

BIKER.

Hatred.

COWBOY/GIRL.

Not knowing any better.

POLICE OFFICER. *(In a strong, authoritative voice)*

I think it is ignorance.

There is a heavy pause. Some students look uncomfortable.

SAILOR.

Well, I'm going to play devil's advocate here. For some people it might be ignorance—coming from a place of not knowing, a place of fear. For other people, it comes from a belief system—and that's not the same as ignorance.

POLICE OFFICER. *(Leaning back in his chair)*

That kind of belief system and ignorance are exactly the same.

Tension is thick in the air. Eyes dart between SAILOR and POLICE OFFICER and up to WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN. Whoa, whoa, careful here.

Students freeze in a tableau. WONDER(ING) WOMAN stands in spotlight and addresses the audience.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Are my feet sliding out from under me on this slippery ground? Stay soft. Stay calm.

Spotlight is off. WONDER(ING) WOMAN once again addresses the class.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Remember we all come from very different places here. Belief systems are very important to many people and often come from very informed places—people's relationships to holy teachings are sacred. We need to be very careful about how we speak here. Maybe we can get two examples of what homophobia might look like in a school and then we're almost ready to watch the film.

"DEAD INDIAN".

Leaving people out or pretending that they don't exist.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER.

Name calling.

COWBOY/GIRL.

Beating someone up.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

A couple of years ago at few education conferences I met an incredible researcher and very kind human being named John Guiney Yallop. He talked about his experiences as an out gay teacher. He engages in autoethnographic research in which he writes poems to explore his past. I want to read two poems from his book *Of Place and Memory: A Poetic Journey (2010).*

What Hate Is

Hate is a mad guard dog
biting at my heels.

Hate is an unwelcome elbow
in my back.

Hate is spit on my desk
and *This teacher sucks cock.*
on the chalkboard.

Hate is letters and telephone calls
to administrators
to express concerns about me wearing *that* t-shirt,
or kissing a man in the parking lot,
or looking at construction workers outside school, hate is
long fingers around my neck
not being able to speak,
words jamming in my throat
like an apocalyptic rush hour.

Hate is a well-oiled apparatus
that contours the body;
we get used to it.

(Guiney Yallop, 2010, p. 56) The author has given permission for the use of this poem.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

In another of John's poems, "Celebrating Saint Valentine," he tells the story of students at his school being able to get a deal on tickets for the Valentine dance as long as a boy

and girl went together—reinforcing the hetero-normative practices that are so common in many schools making them almost invisible.

Spotlight once again is on WONDER(ING) WOMAN as she faces the audience.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I want to read this slowly. Give the words the weight and time they so richly deserve. But I'm so aware of the clock. I know the film is going to take 26 minutes. I've tried to pack a whole lot of stuff into the class. Too much stuff for once class, but I feel compelled to get through all of it—at least touch on all of these slides. This might be my only chance to teach this stuff.

Spotlight is off. WONDER(ING) WOMAN reads the poem to the class.

Celebrating St. Valentine's Day

Two for the price of one
and a half—a bargain
by almost any standards,
unless you're a girl who wants to go to the school dance
with another girl,
or a boy who wants to take a boy
friend.
No discrimination here; it's the same boy/girl treatment
for everyone.

Teachers let this pass;
and they're my colleagues.

The photocopying room buzzes.
It's always been okay before;
what's my problem?

No problem.
Just let the queers dance.

(Guiney Yallop, 2010, p. 45) The author has given permission for the use of this poem.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN finishes reading the poem and then walks to her to show the film. The computer does not work, so she begins fiddling with ejecting the DVD and trying it again. The students are now chatting amongst themselves. CONSTRUCTION WORKER jumps up to help solve the AV issues, so WONDER(ING) WOMAN takes the few minutes to once again address the class.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Sorry, I did test that before class. I promised myself I wouldn't be *that kind* of teacher—you know, the kind who can't even figure out how to show a movie in class, but I guess I'm *that kind* of teacher today. *(Students laugh.)* While this is getting sorted, I'll admit that I'm not sure we are going to have a chance to talk about the film today, but I'll post the questions that came as part of the film's discussion guide in the blog section of our website. When you go home and have had a chance to think about your responses, I encourage you to join an online discussion. In fact, it might be better if we wait a bit to discuss the film anyway. It's quite powerful and it might be best for people to have some time to think. Remember you can always call me or email me.

CONSTUCTION WORKER solves the problem and the film begins to show. WONDER(ING) WOMAN watches the film, but also watches how her students are reacting to the film. Many of the students also seem, in turn, to be watching WONDER(ING) WOMAN. The class seems engaged. They laugh at "appropriate" moments and some react with shock and disgust when some of the students on the film who were homophobic clearly state their opinions.

Local, Student-Made Film About Homophobia in a High School on the Canadian Prairies

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

We're pretty short on time, so I think we're going to have to save your reactions to the film for the website. I want to at least try to touch upon some of the remaining resources before the end of class. Here is one more poem by Guiney Yallop (2010) called "Anti-Lazaurus."

Anti-Lazarus

I sit
and stare
at empty chairs
beside empty desks—
students gone home for the evening.
A single chair and desk pushed
against the wall
in that other classroom
for the custodian to take away.
It's easier that way;
We're not supposed to grieve absence
when silence has been broken
with an act of permanent silence.

The note left said that he was lonely—couldn't go on
like this—just so
sick—
and afraid,
really afraid.

In the staffroom, bewilderment—
Or was that annoyance?
How can anyone feel afraid
here,
in a safe school?

I look at my daybook,
teacher's plans for students' lives;
an empty page
waiting
hoping
like empty chairs and desks,
except for Sam's.

Beside *Attendance* I write,
Count all the students by name;
make sure they're all here.
And then I repeat Sam's names
repeating it over and over,
but no boulder moves,
there are no screams of joy from gathered onlookers,
no one steps forth
from the silence.

(Guiney Yallop, 2010, pp. 52-53) The author has given permission for the use of this poem.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I thought about this poem when I started hearing about the "It Gets Better" campaign in the United States.

It Gets Better
www.itgetsbetter.org

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

"It Gets Better" began after several students from across the United States committed suicide in September 2010 because of homophobic bullying. Dan Savage used a YouTube video and later a whole social media campaign to bring messages of hope to LGBTQ* young people.

Students begin shuffling in their seats, checking their watches, etc.

Okay, okay, I know I usually let you go by now. Can I borrow a few minutes from next class? Give you a longer break next time? I want to cruise through another couple of slides that have some resources and ideas.

Helpful List of Local and National Organizations and Websites

"How to Stop Harrassment in the Hallway in Three Minutes"
(Hetrick & Martin, 1987)

"Ten Things to Say or Do If You Hear, "That's So Gay!"
(http://www.bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=6120)

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Okay, we're out of time! Join the online discussion or email or call me. I don't want anyone feeling troubled after today's class.

Lights dim.

CHAPTER THREE
Practising Discomfort

Practising Discomfort

Our discomfort arises from all of our efforts to put ground under our feet, to realize our dream of constant okayness. When we resist change, it's called suffering. But when we completely let go and not struggle against it, when we can embrace the groundlessness of our situation and relax into its dynamic quality, that's called enlightenment, or awakening to our true nature, to our fundamental goodness. (Chodron, 2012, p. 6)

In my teaching experience it is consistently questions of race and sexuality that are the most "discomforting" to educators and students. I want to understand how *collectively* it is possible to step into this murky mindfield and come out as allies without severe injury to any party. (Boler, 1999, p. 176)

The question is, is it possible to investigate and befriend our suffering no matter what the circumstances? Are there commonsensical and practical ways for us to approach deeply painful experiences and not make them worse? What might be the consequences of seeing that it is possible to intentionally and mindfully *work with pain* and suffering when they do arise in our lives? (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p. 95)

Writing well can make us feel temporarily worse because we are breaking the code on ourself. We are shifting patterns we have outgrown. We are shape-shifting into a new form that feels strange to us in its fluidity. We tell ourselves stories about our lives. We believe, "I am this kind of person, not that kind" and then something happens, something jostles us, and we begin, uncomfortably, vulnerably, to wonder, "Maybe I am no so much this sort of person. Maybe I am a little more that sort of person." (Cameron, 1998, p. 145)

In classrooms throughout the world, dedicated teachers mine the depths of human cruelty and suffering with their students, in the hope that their students will never repeat these injustices and that they may prevent others from committing them as well. . . . Causing students pain in social justice education is unavoidable, but it is essential that educators distinguish pedagogically valuable pain from that which is less so. (Mintz, 2013, p. 228)

In this chapter I begin to explore discomfort in the context of teaching and learning. At first glance, discomfort seems like a fairly self-explanatory term. Discomfort is a lack of comfort or ease. Yet it soon gets more complicated. We may feel varying levels of discomfort physically, mentally, emotionally, or morally. We may feel our own discomfort or we may feel discomfort when we witness the discomfort of others. As I begin to read more about how other authors from the fields of education, mindfulness studies, and trauma studies describe discomfort, I notice that many terms begin to emerge sometimes controversially, sometimes interchangeably: troubles, unsettling of assumptions, pain, suffering, wounding, crisis, disequilibrium, trauma, difficult situations, hard stories. As I read these varied terms, I feel my level of discomfort increasing because I struggle to understand the nuances and implications of the vocabulary of discomfort. Are all these terms equal in weighting? Is it appropriate to use them synonymously? Who gets to decide whether something is discomfort, wounding, trauma, or suffering? How do I begin the "essential" educational process of distinguishing "pedagogically valuable pain from that is which is less so" (Mintz, 2013, p. 228)?

I start the process by acknowledging my struggles and discomfort with the language of discomfort. I believe this is a pedagogically valuable because it prompts me to dig deeper and learn more. I embrace the beginner's stance as I begin to integrate how others write about suffering and discomfort and as I begin to use the language myself. I write, in various places throughout this dissertation, about almost all of the terms in the list above. I believe discomfort is a subjective and contextual experience and therefore can and should have a subjective and contextual range of expressions. The range of terms helps me to think through "how difficult experiences—exposed wounds and the *exposing of wounds*—functions" (Dutro, p. 193) in teaching and learning. Dutro (2011) argues that "trauma is destabilizing, at least in part,

because challenging circumstances function differently for some of us than others when we carry them into public spaces—they function differently for teachers than for students and how those experiences function for students is related to power, privilege, and social positioning" (p. 194). Like Dutro (2011), "I am interested in thinking about how *the difficult* can be productive pedagogically and relationally" (p. 193) within the context of teacher education, social justice education, and/or cancer survivorship studies. Life writing about the difficult has become a way for me to practise a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) by documenting and sharing my vulnerabilities, emotions, and suffering on the page. Nelson (1991) reminds me of the healing potential of sharing the suffering of our lives through writing: "Beyond our wounding, we have choices that are crucial to our health and well-being. We can choose to hide our wounds and pretend and go on bleeding throughout our lives—or we can tell the stories of our woundings, we can 'publish' them, and we can heal ourselves" (p. 105). My life writing in this strand is offered as a reassurance to myself and others that suffering does happen, discomfort is necessary, and being troubled and wounded can become part of growth, learning, and teaching. Through this life writing, I also invite teachers and learners to consider the ways that we can heal ourselves and others by publishing our words, actions, and commitments to social justice.

Feeling Troubled: Practising Discomfort

Just before the lights dim in the play that ends the last chapter, the teacher says, "I don't want anyone feeling troubled after today's class." Since I first uttered that line in my classroom, I have wondered what I really meant when I said it and questioned why I said it at all. Did I not find homophobia, transphobia, and gender and sexuality discrimination deeply troubling? Did I not believe that feeling troubled was essential and inevitable when confronting

previously held assumptions about heteronormative values? Why would I want my students *not* to feel troubled?

I understand my desire to reassure my students, unburden some of their troubles, and alleviate my own discomfort. Few people choose trouble and discomfort for themselves, or others, if alternative feelings are available. Chödrön (2003) writes, "As a species, we should not underestimate our low tolerance for discomfort" (p. 13). Human beings devote great energy and resources to ease, mask, forget, or avoid discomfort. Lamott (1994) notices that explicitly and implicitly we are "taught to improve uncomfortable situations, to change things, alleviate unpleasant feelings" (p. 178). At first consideration, this kind of teaching might sound like caring. Out of care and concern for my students, I could ask: What can I do to change this situation, make things pleasant, and no longer feel discomfort? Yet this question starkly contrasts what Kumashiro (2010) wants emancipatory educators to ask, "When students confront discomforting information what activities, conversations, reading, or experiences can help them bear being uncomfortable for a while?" (p. 31) One question asks how to avoid discomfort; the other asks how to bear discomfort. These are profoundly different pedagogical aims.

If the pedagogical aim is social justice, it is necessary to invite students and teachers to critically examine who they think are, why they have more or less privilege than others, and who profits from inequity. Mintz (2013) defines "social justice education" as:

> any educational curriculum, activity, or encounter in which a teacher explicitly intends to facilitate students' moral development in order that they be able to recognize the mistreatment of others, refuse to add to it, and act to alleviate it, especially when that

> mistreatment and suffering are due to marginalization, discrimination, and oppression. (p. 228)

Boler (1999) advocates for teachers and students who aim for social justice to courageously embrace a pedagogy of discomfort:

> A pedagogy of discomfort begins by inviting educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs, and to examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others. Within this culture of inquiry and flexibility, a central focus is to recognize how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see. (pp. 176-177)

By its very name, we understand that discomfort is necessary if we are to recognize and acknowledge what we previously could not or would not. Boler warns, "The educator who endeavors to rattle complacent cages, who attempts to 'wrest us anew' from the threat of conformism undoubtedly faces the treacherous ghosts of others' fears and terrors, which in turn evoke one's own demons" (p. 175). For some of the students in my class, talking about sexuality within the context of schools would have unleashed some "treacherous ghosts" at the same time it was evoking some of my "own demons."

Boler (1999) explores the dilemmas and discomfort that arise when teacher educators choose to address issues of sexuality with teacher candidates:

> The volatility of these issues in our class was remarkable, a heated and contested debate. Students did not seem hesitant to express their resistances and fears, and the tone of exchange reflected impassioned anger from all sides. Regardless of the source of one's beliefs, the call to examine questions of sexuality evokes strong fears and defensive anger. (p. 194)

Boler purposely created a pedagogical space, which challenged students to face "cherished assumptions" (p. 191). Since this process might have felt "like a threat to their very identity" (p. 191), Boler expected and invited emotion, especially anger. She interprets "this reaction of anger . . . not so much as a righteous objection to one's honor, but more as defense of one's investments in the values of dominant culture" (p. 191). A pedagogy of discomfort means teachers create space for their students to begin to identify what dominant culture values and recognize what they may have to gain or lose if they try to shift those values. These are risky and contested spaces—both for the students and for the educator. Boler shares her own discomforting decision-making process about how she should include the exploration of sexuality in her teacher education curriculum:

> However, as an educator committed to social justice, as are many of my students, I find myself in a bind. What are my choices about how to approach the volatile question of sexuality? Do I "omit and erase," choose not to address the question at all in my work in educational foundations? Do I raise the issue, and say, "I realize how difficult this is for you, and that you fear losing your jobs, so never mind—don't think about incorporating this?" Or do I raise these issues and create a space in which we examine the risks, the calls to action, the needs of lesbian and gay youth, as well as children raised in lesbian and gay families, do we debate how we might offer information about abortion? To raise these issues seems the only ethical path to me. I cannot demand that they choose to address these issues when they go into their classrooms. But, as part of the pedagogy of discomfort, I can hope they examine their emotional investments and beliefs, evaluate how the actions that they follow from their belief and strong feeling may affect others,

> and as a result, become able to evaluate their teaching philosophy and understand when and why other teachers choose different curricula. (p. 196)

Boler discerns the most ethical choice is to invite students into open and uncomfortable explorations of sexuality, even though she has concerns about the risks of creating present or future suffering for her students.

While I believe in the transformative necessity of a pedagogy of discomfort, especially in contested spaces around sexuality, as a teacher I continue to struggle with my ethical responsibilities to protect my students from suffering and trauma. Mintz (2013) describes this struggle as the "paradox of suffering" in social justice education:

> Yet there is a tension in recognizing that we cause our students pain to prevent or alleviate the pain of others. This is the paradox of suffering in social justice education . . . Suffering may be pedagogically necessary or valuable for our students, but teachers have an ethical responsibility to limit their students' suffering and to make sense of their pain. (p. 216)

Teaching about social justice means talking about and showing the consequences of inequities and the suffering of those who have been denied their human rights and dignity. It means raising questions about what can be done individually and collectively about this suffering. Inevitably, this can lead to discomfort for some students as they become aware of their roles and responsibilities in the suffering of others. Mintz argues, "whether the students' suffering is a direct aim of the educator or the by-product of an educational experience, the educator is to a significant extent responsible for inflicting that suffering" (p. 220). So, I wonder how do I "bear being uncomfortable" (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 31) with my responsibility for the suffering of my students as we struggle to create more just and compassionate schools?

Teachers practising the discomfort of social justice education require reassurance that their students' and their own suffering is a necessary catalyst for change. Dutro (2011) argues:

> The weight of hard life experiences, particularly in the lives of children, is hard to bear. Yet, those stories are part and parcel of classroom life—whether or not those experiences are invited in or acknowledged, met with caring or disinterest, they are always present. Yet, even in their ever-presences, the emotionally fraught experiences, the ongoing struggles, do not comfortably reside with traditional notions of school. (p. 195)

Since emotionally fraught and difficult experiences do not usually fit the usual notions of traditional school, educators need to be reminded of the value of those experiences. Mintz (2013) states, "education cannot be comfortable and simultaneously enable one to recognize and address inequities in society" (p. 226). Boler (1999) suggests teachers should carefully craft spaces that encourage compassion and reduce confrontation:

> It matters a great deal how the educator invites the students to engage in collective witnessing. It may be that an educator needs to "share" the suffering and vulnerability, to explicitly discus the pedagogies and one's own emotional challenges. How we speak, how we listen, when and how we "confront" one another matters a great deal. (p. 199)

Boler encourages teachers to share their own emotions and vulnerability with their students—to model for their students what it looks, sounds, and feels like to practice discomfort and to lean into suffering. Brown (2012) argues that teachers and leaders should be more open and up-front about discomfort to enable the processes of growth and deep learning: "the simple and honest process of letting people know that discomfort is normal, it's going to happen, why it happens, and why it's important, reduces anxiety, fear, and shame. Periods of discomfort become an expectation and a norm" (p. 199). When discomfort becomes a stated and modeled expectation

and feels like an acceptable norm then students may recognize their own and others' emotions as necessary, understandable, and powerful, rather than threatening.

As a teacher educator, I strive to model the practices and processes that I advocate for my teacher education students to use with their students. I could tell my teacher education students that I value discomfort as a necessary component of social justice education and that I believe teachers need to share their own experiences of discomfort with their students, but this will not be authentic if I do not fully participate in this process. I also need to show how I, as a teacher, can share my stories of discomfort, wounding, or suffering with them, my students, as part of a reciprocal process of testimony and witnessing—a process of telling and hearing stories of difficulty, struggle, or trauma. Dutro (2011) draws upon the theories of testimony and witnessing from trauma studies (particularly the work of Felman & Laub, 1992) to conceptualize how this process is often most "productive, even transformative" (p. 197) in classrooms when it is circular and cyclical:

> I find the circular image appealing because it has no definitive end; it implies that there is not a point of leveling off and being "done." Rather, the smooth, endlessness of the circle suggests that the compulsion and responsibility to testify are always present. In this view, the circle of testimony-witness begins when someone's difficult experience enters the classroom (in whatever way that occurs) and demands that others bear witness. Faced with such testimony and in acting as witness, the listener may respond with personal testimony that, in turn, must be witnessed and, again, may prompt testimony for her witnesses. (pp. 196-197)

Important to teachers, "this circular notion of testimony and witness in classrooms requires teachers to participate as both witnesses to student experiences and testifies to their own" (p.

198). Teachers are not simply receivers of stories. We also need to offer stories of our experiences that help us connect with the lives of our students, while at the same time modeling, through our talk and analysis of our stories, the critical process of examining how we are differently positioned by our challenges (Dutro, p.198). Dutro argues that teachers' "own testimony, then, functions as a conscious, risky, move to share the vulnerability that is inherent in classrooms, while remaining aware of how privilege and power shape the stakes of those exposures" (p. 198). Teachers need to be part of the critical witnessing process. In order for teachers to learn how critical witnessing functions and why their testimonies have value, they would greatly benefit from experiencing it with their teachers during their teacher education programs. I move next to contextualizing my own testimonial pieces that share some of the discomfort I have experienced as a teacher, learner, and cancer survivor.

Contextualizing the Practising Discomfort Life Writing Pieces

Closet Play, Act 2

We re-enter the life writing in this strand by returning to the *Closet Play.* The second act opens with the teacher educator responding to a request by one of her students to debrief the film that was used as a resource in the previous class about homophobia and transphobia. We re-enter the play as the student characters arrange their chairs into a talking circle and the teacher searches for a pen to record the experience. This second act shares the conversation and emotions that unfolded in the talking circle. Readers might feel discomfort with Wonder(ing) Woman in this act for a multitude of reasons. This is intentional and necessary: it is the messy stuff of sharing a dynamic *currere* through life writing.

It is in this act where we see the teacher character Wondering Woman experience a great deal of visceral emotional discomfort. Wondering Woman is experiencing Mintz's (2013)

paradox of suffering: she is aware that many of her students have experienced suffering as a consequence of engaging in the social justice education experiences of the previous class and as the teacher she feels responsible for that suffering. Some readers may question whether Wonder(ing) Woman is able to hear or attend to her students' deep and complex learning about sexuality and gender equity. They may wonder whether she is too caught up in having her own discomfort and suffering validated and eliminated to listen carefully to the voices and experiences of her students. This is fair critique. Wonder(ing) Woman cries, she tries to justify her teaching choices, and she seemingly needs her students to reassure her through their words and actions. She is not listening to her students in a deeply attentive way, so it becomes important to question whether she can hear them at all. Yet, she is still mindful here. She is not able to process what she is hearing and she knows she is listening through complex emotions. She knows this emotional listening is still incredibly valuable, but she is aware she will need to return to what she has heard at a different time, space, and emotional space if she is truly going to make any meaning. She is able to hear her students well enough to take down notes so that when she can later return to the experience to hear her students speak to her again and again.

When I momentarily step away from the character of Wonder(ing) Woman and try to return to the moments when I listened to my students confront the assumptions of the film, their colleagues, and themselves, I know that my emotions surfaced and flooded over. In the moments when the interactions were unfolding, I felt like I had done harm. I thought I had not taught the precious class in a way that was safe or supportive—I felt like I had damaged relationships between my students and caused unintentional wounds. Although I now feel differently about the encounter, that was my honest, in the moment reaction. I knew that the unfolding conversation was incredibly needed for the teacher education students to explore

issues that had largely been left unspoken in the Faculty. I could sense that this was a productive, thought provoking, and potentially healing learning space. I could hear the complexity of the unfolding conversation. I was most definitely feeling my own discomfort, but I kept the conversation going. My emotions and interruptions undeniably changed the direction of the conversation's content and tone, especially since I was in the privileged position of teacher. However, I acknowledged my tears, we kept talking, and I kept documenting the conversation, paying close attention to the words of my students. I may have listened to my students and documented their voices through my tears, but I was able to hear their contributions at the time in a way that I could make sense of it later through my later life writing processes. If I had not been able to do so, this dissertation would not have been authored. In hindsight, I now read this play very differently than when I first experienced it. I cringe and feel discomfort with some of Wonder(ing) Woman's words and actions, while at the same time I feel empathy and compassion for her. To give just one example, I wish Wonder(ing) Woman did not apologize for crying. I wish she could have acknowledged how necessary it was for us all to practice our discomfort in that space. However, I have come to know what I know now because of that discomforting experience—just as it was and just as I was.

"What Hurts"

The second piece in this strand is the second poem I wrote when I was feeling wounded and uncertain as a young teacher in my new school in Oxford. I wrote it at the same time as I wrote the poem "Transluscence" (see Chapter 2). Although it continues to tell me the story of that time and place as a beginning teacher, it also resonates with my more recent struggles as a

teacher educator who aims for social justice, and therefore regularly experiences "what hurts" as I teach and learn.

"Big-C Critical Confessions, Or, Where the hell do they keep the big-V vomit bags?"

I wrote the second poem I have included in this strand about an experience I had at the very beginning of the course-work component of my doctoral program. I was lucky enough to be accepted into a "Transformative Teaching, Learning, and Leading" doctoral studies cohort. Before I had even met the amazing colleagues that were part of the cohort, we had all been sent a list of readings for our first course that we would take together. The list was filled with big-C Critical educational theorists: Apple, Giroux, Kincheloe, Steinberg, Mezirow, and Friere to name a few. The week before my official doctoral studies began I was studiously and enthusiastically working through my required readings. I was feeling a kinship to what I was reading: here were theorists arguing for the importance of critically analyzing the power and privilege that shape all culturally and socially embedded educational experiences. I agreed with the authors, highlighted their words, wrote notes in the margins, imagined myself discussing these important points with like-minded, enlightened colleagues in courses where we would seek social justice together. Then my husband came home after a pragmatic trip to the grocery store and told me about his chance meeting with a community member we had contact with in a previous context. When I later returned to the readings, I felt I had crashed into the gap between my espoused values and beliefs and the enacted practices of my real life. It made me feel so nauseous I wished I had an airline provided vomit bag. This poem, which I wrote in the second year of my doctoral coursework, tells the story of this early discomforting dilemma.

"A Letter of Complaint"

This piece is written as a formal letter of complaint. I wrote this letter before I was diagnosed with cancer when I had a different vision and trajectory for my dissertation. Writing this playful, yet purposeful, letter of complaint became a way for me to work through my emotions—especially my anger and frustration—as I started to unpack my homophobia /transphobia classroom encounter. After the candidacy exam where I first wrote about my teaching experience, I challenged myself to learn more about the inequities occurring on a daily basis for gender and sexuality minorities involved in the school system, especially within the Canadian context. At the time of writing this letter, I had proposed that my dissertation would be structured like a medieval compilation text and be composed of a confession, a complaint, and several tales of different characters—somewhat like Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales.* As I sat down to write my "strongly worded letter of complaint," I thought I would easily focus on the issues of human rights and dignities that are lacking for so many students, teachers, and family members because of their gender and/or sexuality expressions. Yet when I began my complaint, I realized how uncomfortable I was about complaining. I experienced my own struggles to express what concerns me most about schools and the wider social and cultural power systems that are in place to maintain status quo. Writing my letter of complaint became a way for me to practice discomfort and begin to express what matters most to me. As Zembylas (2013) argues:

> Anger at injustice can be a positive and powerful source of personal and political insight in education (Lorde, 1984), because it helps to move teachers and students out of a cycle of self-pity, blame, and guilt into a mode of action that somehow responds to injustice. (p. 514)

Writing became a call to action for myself and for potential readers.

"Raising the White Flag on "Cancer is a Battle" Metaphor"

The final piece in this "Practising Discomfort" strand comes from my experiences writing through my struggles with my cancer experience. I chose to include this particular journal entry, because I believe my discomfort with cancer in this piece is not about the pain or suffering that comes from living with a chronic illness, but rather from being bombarded with the assumptions our society holds about cancer. My mastectomy surgery had taken place less than a month before I wrote in my journal about the metaphors I was continually hearing about cancer since my diagnosis. Very frequently, I was hearing well-intentioned, loving friends and family members use "cancer as a battle" metaphors when they tried to provide me with courage and support. They insisted I was a "fighter" and I would "win" against this disease. I felt a distinct dis-ease, an overwhelming discomfort with this culturally pervasive battle metaphor. As someone who seeks peace, I found the violence of these metaphors lacked congruence with my life values. I shuddered to think about the implications for those who die and have "lost the battle" or somehow "not fought hard enough." Through practising life-writing, I was able to name my discomfort and re-story some of the language and metaphors of cancer that worked for me.

Closet Play

Act 2, *Scene 1*

Teacher's desk remains on the stage, but the chairs have been arranged in a circle. The screen is no longer needed, so it can be pushed into the background. The teacher is once again in WONDER(ING) WOMAN costume without the cardigan or skirt. She holds the blue puffy fish toy that was on her desk and plays with it when she begins to speak. In her lap she holds a notebook and an orange gel pen.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Last class was pretty intense with a very evocative film. I think it is important to take the time now to allow people to respectfully speak and listen about their own reactions to last class. Does anyone want to start? We'll use this puffy fish as our "talking object" as we have before when we've shared in a circle.

A few hands shoot up, WONDER(ING) WOMAN tosses the fish across the room to the CONSTRUCTION WORKER. When the students speak, WONDER(ING) WOMAN starts writing in her notebook.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER.

The film did surprise me—I guess I really thought we'd come further. It's not what I've experienced with the kids I see. It saddens me—this leaning towards the ugly in school and society. The film ignited something for me though. Things are obviously not changing fast enough, so I asked myself, 'What can *I* do?' It seemed a call to action.

Students toss the fish each time before the next speaker talks.

BIKER.

I would have unpacked this film *right after* showing it. There were a lot of disturbing things said in that film and there is a lot left to ponder. I would want to talk about the

hurtful language right away. I wouldn't want my sexual-minority students left internalizing any of the ugly messages.

Spotlight on WONDER(ING) WOMAN who begins to speak directly to the audience.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN. *(In a small voice.)*

I think I might throw up. Despite my planning and best intentions, I think I've done harm. But I need to keep listening, keep focusing on the students' words. I don't want to miss out on these important reactions because I'm too busy panicking or justifying my own pedagogical choices.

The BIKER hands the puffy fish to the POLICE OFFICER.

POLICE OFFICER.

I think it's a wonderful idea to teach about anti-homophobia education, but I didn't like the video, at all. I found it really uninformed. The way the students all talked about the one gay guy in the film, was like they had to justify his worth somehow—"Oh, he's so smart, he plays the piano and makes art." I would *not* use this video. Ever.

SAILOR.

I think the film tried to provide some opposite points of view, but there are so many ugly things that are said in this film without really talking out some of the whys. There is some talk about family and religion, but it doesn't go very deep. I don't think I'd use it either. It's not very useful or effective. I think it's missing what the school is doing in response. There's too much of an "I'm cool with homosexuals" message without enough depth or action.

Spotlight once again on WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I can actually hear my heart pounding in my ears. It's hard to stop myself from jumping in to comment every time someone has spoken. Focusing on scrawling down the words seems to be helping me keep my mouth shut so I can listen better.

Lights go back up. "DEAD INDIAN" now has the puffy fish.

"DEAD INDIAN".

This video has such important content that it really needs to be done effectively. I feel like it was taken on a whim, without really realizing that this was also for others—that there's a larger public view. The students don't sound like they know what they're talking about—they don't realize how much they could be offending others.

COWBOY/GIRL.

I found the video really uninformed and horrifically sad. There is no method to help anything. The one piece of advice for sexual minority youth seemed to be that they should pretend to be confident so that others wouldn't keep bullying them. That isn't enough.

CONSTRUCTION WOKER.

I think I would use the video. No, it's not perfect. Yes, the students are immature—they're talking without thinking through all of it. There are some horrendous opinions, but with some *responsible teaching* you could highlight all of this. Look at the "Us" and "Them" language, the choices the students made in putting the film together, the strengths and weaknesses. I don't think there were enough religious views and diversity shown—there should be some non-Christian world views included—like some students talking from a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist perspective. It definitely would need a *real* discussion right after it.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN. *(Blurts out, holding out shaking hands to catch the fish.)*

Can I?

Spotlight on WONDER(ING) WOMAN. Students freeze in tableau while she first addresses only the audience.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I don't mean to interrupt, but I can no longer keep myself out of the conversation. What I want to do right now is shout out, "Have you ever *been* to the town where this film was made? Don't you think the students did the best they could to represent the diversity, or lack thereof, in the film?"

I'm hearing my students project blame onto the film and I don't think that's very fair or helpful. But would I stop the conversation if I pointed out that I believe some of the comments said in this circle so far are not showing much empathy for the students who bravely chose to make this film? Should I ask my students how they would have been able to talk on camera about these complicated issues when they were still in high school? Is this the time or place to try to raise critical awareness of the social and cultural forces that have kept sexuality and gender diversity silenced and taboo? Ask why so many people do not have practice in examining or speaking about what they believe?

My head is thumping; my heart is racing. I'm surprised so many of these teacher candidates seem to think that this resource, which I believed was such a gem from our prairie context, is potentially destructive.

Spotlight is off. WONDER(ING) WOMAN addresses class.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I had the very best intentions in showing this film.

Her voice begins to waver with emotions. The spotlight is turned back on.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Can I continue without "losing it" in front of my students?

Spotlight off.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Sometimes good intentions can still lead to harm. *(Tears flood her eyes.)* It sounds like I really should have talked about the film right after showing it and I'm sorry that I didn't do so, especially if it left people feeling upset.

A sob escapes. WONDER(ING) Woman is now crying in full force. Spotlight comes back on.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Okay. So, I'm bawling. I'm embarrassed and exposed. *(Pauses and sobs.)* I don't want this conversation to stop. My emotions embodied in this non-ceasing crying will just have to be part of this.

Spotlight off.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Sorry, sorry. I ummm… well, I'm obviously really emotional about this.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN pauses and tries taking a few long, steadying breaths. All students are watching her with looks of either concern or alarm. They freeze as the spotlight turns back on.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I wonder if any of these students have ever had a university instructor sob in front of them before. I don't think I've ever had a professor cry in all my years attending university classes. I don't even remember very many teachers crying in all the years I

went to school. This feels like a major emotional transgression, but what can I do? The dam has burst. There is no closing the floodgates now.

Spotlight off.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

During out last class, I chose not to include too much talking time because I went to a workshop about anti-homophobia education that suggested that too much debate could just cause deeper divisions in groups. I thought it best to focus on human rights. Give lots of information.

I do want to point out that the name of this lecture was "Addressing Hate: Teaching Anti-homophobic Education to High School Teachers." This was never meant as an example of how I would teach this to high school students. This is information I thought you all needed before you went into schools. Now, I'm obviously emotional, but I am learning *so much* right now. I think this conversation should continue—don't censor yourselves because I'm a weepy mess. I *need* to learn more Who's next?

WONDER(ING) WOMAN throws the fish.

POLICE OFFICER.

I think we need to do more work thinking with our students about what *hetero*sexuality is and how genders are represented in our society. We need to look at the history of sexualities and genders—I have some great books if anyone wants to them.

BIKER.

I went to a special PD session last Friday on "How to Teach a Controversial Topic." That speaker focused on trying to get away from polarizing stances by using critical inquiry.

We were encouraged to ask, “Is it right to deny rights to anyone?” rather than putting people in a “for” or “against” stance. The film was polarizing.

COWBOY/GIRL.

I don’t think the video was that bad. I’m hearing a lot of moral outrage here, yet I’m not surprised by what I heard the students in the film say. This issue has been around for a long time—I don’t think we’re going to fix it for another 100 or 200 years. I don’t know if it’s immature for students to bring it to the light and talk about it. I don’t think there’s just one solution. There’s a lot of training and un-training that needs to happen in anti-homophobia education. I don’t know how we teach people that they can disagree with an idea but still embrace a person. The students’ attempts to tackle this complicated issue wasn’t perfect, but I think we need to weigh idealism with action—at least they did something.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER.

Culture is constantly and rapidly changing—it’s dynamic. I think it’s sad you think that it would take centuries to change our culture’s attitudes towards LGBTQ* people. I didn’t love the video either, but I agree with you that I also think the students’ hearts were in the right place.

Construction Worker directly meets Wonder(ing) Woman’s eyes.

And I think your heart was in the right place when you showed it.

Wonder(ing) Woman begins to sniff and wipe her eyes again.

Perhaps the students needed more guidance and reflection. Perhaps setting up a clear division of opinions was a mistake. But teachers are often the most important cultural, or at least government-type, official figures in students’ immediate lives. We are called to

be agents of change. We need to do the unpacking of this issue and help our students unpack it.

"DEAD INDIAN".

I'm not LGBTQ*, but I am pro-LGBTQ* rights. I think we need to acknowledge the progress society's making on this issue, even though we know there is still much further to go. As a social studies teacher, I think a lot about the freedom of expression and the desire to encourage open-mindedness about all perspectives. Can we be open-minded enough to accept those who have close-minded prejudices? I know society influences how that close-mindedness is formed, but should we allow it to be expressed especially in schools?

BIKER.

You know, at the end of the class and the end of the film there was *only one* person who asked me about the film. I'm going to out him/her, too. It was SAILOR. SAILOR was the only person to ask me how I felt about it or whether I would teach it. Everyone knows I'm out, but *only one* person asked me.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN. *(Almost chokes out the words and another hard sob escapes.)*

I need the fish.

Miraculously she catches it and keeps talking even though the crying makes it somewhat difficult to understand her.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I . . . I'm really kicking myself now.

The student sitting next to WONDER(ING) WOMAN empathetically puts a hand on her shoulder.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I purposely didn't ask you about the film or the class. I almost did, but I purposely stopped myself. I don't think it should be your responsibility to have to talk on behalf of the LGBTQ* community. I didn't want to single you out, make you feel like you had to give *the* reaction for the class. This is work we *all* have to do, but maybe I didn't recognize your lived experience enough. This is what scares me about teaching this—either way could be interpreted and experienced as further insensitivity or injustice.

Hands shoot up all over the circle again. WONDER(ING) WOMAN tosses the fish across the circle to an outstretched hand.

"DEAD INDIAN".

I know it isn't exactly the same thing, but I connected the title of our class—addressing language of hate—to experiences I've had with racism. I'm Aboriginal and I always wonder *when* or *if* I should "come out" to people about it. I can "pass" as a white person really easily. Okay, obviously I'm "out" today. I'm wearing the costume, but even without the ironic headdress on I'm always aware when we talk about Aboriginal issues in classes here that I'm one of only a few self-identified Aboriginal people in the room. I don't always want to give the Aboriginal voice, but I'm glad we're talking about the issues. I think it can be difficult, but I think that's why we need to keep talking. I think we need times that are awkward.

SAILOR.

I'm glad we didn't talk about the film right away. And I need to remind everyone that we were warned that there were diverse opinions and tough language in the film both before we watched it and again after.

Spotlight on WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

I notice other people are nodding. What a relief! The weight of this emotion is making it hard to remember what happened during the last class at all.

Spotlight off.

CONSTRUCTION WORKER.

I thought it was a sensitive and caring choice to wait to have the discussion and offer the online option. I wasn't ready to talk about it yet—I wouldn't have known what to say. I also kept thinking about how much the homophobic words were like racist slurs that aren't exactly tolerated but sometimes heard—all the language of hates we might hear in schools.

COWBOY/GIRL.

I'm friends with you BIKER, but I didn't ask you about the film because I needed to think first. I went home and called one of my best friends from high school. She came out a few years after he moved away from our hometown. She's always been the person I call when I'm trying to figure stuff out—and not just about this issue, but about stuff in general. Once I talked to her—and probably lots of us have people in our lives that we are close with who are gay or lesbian or whatever—then I talked to you about it yesterday.

POLICE OFFICER.

I'm also good friends with you, BIKER *(winking at BIKER),* and I also didn't approach you after class. I didn't want you to feel like you were our gay/lesbian/trans mascot or something—or that you were being swarmed by us. So I talked to you in the student lounge after class.

"DEAD INDIAN".

WONDER(ING) WOMAN please, please don't kick yourself. You've made so many *good choices* in this class. I can't even imagine another class being as safe and open to be able to have this conversation. I know I've never talked about this issue before in any other university class, ever. So, we didn't have a discussion after the film: some people would've made a different choice and others would've done what you did. The important thing is, we're talking about it now and I don't think I've ever had a class in university where I've heard people sharing like this. So, please, please don't beat yourself up. This has been such an important class and course for so many of us.

Many in the circle are nodding and smiling. Someone starts to clap and most others join in. The fish is tossed back to WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Thanks. Thank you. I'm overwhelmed. I'm aware we're almost out of time though. How about one more comment?

SAILOR.

Um, yeah, this has been one of those classes I'm not going to forget. After talking to you, BIKER, I went home and called my brother. He pretty recently came out and my family is still freaking out—to say the least. But, you know, I think everyone in our high school kind of knew. Although it was obviously a lot harder for him, it was still hard for me too. During my last practicum, I got involved in the Gay Straight Alliance Club. I came and talked about my brother. I think, especially 'cause I'm young it was really important, you know. I was one of the only teacher candidates that went to it. I also coached the basketball team and this guy from the team said he'd heard I showed up at

the GSA and wanted to know more about it. So I told him about my brother and stuff and I think the whole team was listening. They didn't have those kinds of clubs when my brother and I were in school, so I think it's really important—especially for new teachers to go to them. Let students know we're supportive and safe.

WONDER(ING) WOMAN.

Wow. What a class. And to think I promised we'd end earlier than usual today. I guess that'll have to wait 'till next week. Thank you all so much for today.

BIKER.

I think we need to end in a cohort hug. Come on WONDER(ING) WOMAN, get in here. Get your hug on.

Lights dim as the circle moves into a hug.

What Hurts

What hurts:
having fears exposed in front of those who make you afraid.
hoping so much for someone, and watching them lack faith in themselves.
working to exhaustion and not having it recognized by the ones you are doing it for.
missing everything that feels like support, because it feels like home.
feeling like you are always a bit on the outside.
caring more than what is recommended.
being isolated in the midst of others.
hearing more criticism than praise.
speaking and not being listened to.
trying to be strong when you feel broken
knowing you wouldn't change who and how you are,
even though you know it will cause you more pain.
facing those who expose you again and again.
attempting to be everything to some who have nothing.
reaching out to those who can help you.

2001, Oxford Community School

Big-C Critical Confessions
Or, Where the hell do they keep the big-V vomit bags?

My very first PhD class
I confess to strangers
faces belonging
to names and email addresses
linked with mine
as the
Transformative
Teaching
Learning and
Leading
doctoral cohort.

I confess to these
virtually linked names
but virtual strangers
that I am a big-F
Fake.
A big-I Imposter.

I'd just had one of those
"disconcerting dilemmas"
or whatever double-d
Mezirow term
that leaves me
naseous
panting
ready to peel off my skin
stick my head in the sand
(or in a vat of acid)
avoid mirrors and social contact
or
alternatively and more conveniently
block out / dismiss / justify
above mentioned
double-d dilemma
alleviating disconcerting and paralytic
side effects.

The very week before
the above mentioned
very first class
I stayed home on a Saturday morning
reading.

Pure luxury / leisure / privilege / power.
I wasn't exactly
lounging in a pink feathered boa
eating rose and brandy-filled bon bons
reading about heaving bosoms and languid sunsets.
No.
I was reading Apple, Giroux, Kincheloe.
Big-C Critical theorists.

I was underlining extensively.
Filling margins enthusiastically.
Nodding my head.
Mmm-hmming and yes-ing!
Confused by multisyllabic words.
Continuously referring to Wikipedia
and online dictionaries.
Confounded by how to pronounce
hedge-a-moany / ha-jem-uny.
But all the same,
feeling the aha!
Theory speaking to my lived, schooled experiences
of / with / beyond / between / alongside
gender, race, class.

I (minus the pom-poms, but plus the perkiness) cheered:
Give me a big-C! Critical!
Give me a big-T! Transformative!
Give me a big S! Big J!
What do you get?
Social Justice!
Yay, me!

I could read, re-read, then read again
complicated lines
without disruption
on a Saturday morning
because my husband,
my Super feminist husband,
braved Super Store with two small children,
on a Saturday morning.
Super saint status awarded.

When the above mentioned Super feminist husband returned,
bearing our bins and reusable bags
overflowing,
herding our now fighting and pouting children

into our new-to-us, walk-to-the-university home,
I did not need to consult Wikipedia or an on-line dictionary
to comprehend
frazzeled, frustrated, fed up face.

"We were in line for almost an hour.
And you'll never believe who was right in front of us—
chatting to us the whole time."

Then he asked if I remembered her.
The woman from gymnastics.
The immense, waddling, gap-toothed,
    greasy-haired, "yous guys"
    shouting, panting
    mother of the toddler whose eyes seemed glazed
    and nose always running
    and the obese daughter
    who never stayed in line
    or followed directions
    who wandered off alone
    to the bathroom for way too long
    every week
    until I (concerned) checked on her
    finding her filling the sink with wet paper towels.
The woman who yelled at her daughter and screeched at her son.
The one with no sense of the rules—
Hadn't read between the lines to get expected (unsaid) orientation
to parental conduct at Leisure Guide early childhood enrichment programs.

Apparently (I was just figuring it all out myself)
Gymnastics meant one and/or two parents and/or grandparents
bring neat, thin children
to stand in line
walk a balance beam
then stand in line again
while said (grand)parent(s)
sit on bleachers
side by side
in silence
watching said children
(or capturing it all on digital recording devices)
or carefully
shadowing
too-young for the program
yet still (over)active toddlers
(over)protecting them from falls

or (more importantly)
shielding toddler from interrupting
the sa(i)d silence
of the sa(i)d adults.

Apparently Gap-tooth was working a double-shift
missed un/said orientation
kept asking me about my kids' daycares.
Good God.
I don't know.
I'm a stay-at-home mom.
I don't know about picking up kids
at two different places and two different times.
I don't know about communal germs and collective swearing habits.
I don't know about keeping kids up until nine
so I can spend a few hours a day with them
when we're all awake.
I'm at home with mine.
All the time.
Most of the time, it's just us.
Isolated.
We don't get out much—
Hence, gymnastics—
Hence, social and physical enrichment.
Readying them for kindergarten
Fearing how the first five years of life might leave permanent damage.

So, yeah.
I remember her.
Oh God.
My heart dropped for my Super feminist husband.
Bad enough he had to brave
Saturday Super Store with two small children
But ouch.
"I'm so sorry," I said.

We rolled eyes.
Giggled.
Popped on a Disney DVD for the kids.
Worked together to put away
heaps of groceries
into already full cupboards
before putting our
two tired, golden-haired, blue-eyed children
for naps
in their separate bedrooms (one pink, one blue).

Then we both sat down
returning to our scholarly endeavors.
Super feminist husband
is actually
Dr. Super feminist husband
or
Super feminist husband, D.Phil, University of Oxford.

Then
sa(i)d
disconcerting / disorienting / disillusioning / disgusting
dilemma.
Dear God.
Gap-tooth etched on every page.

I search my big C-Critical texts
for a big V-Vomit bag
(like the one they provide on airplanes)
can't find it.
Damn it.
Double d dilemma.

January 26, 2011

Jennifer Watt
Doctoral Candidate and Sessional Instructor
University of the Prairies Research
But, also, when I'm lucky enough to get the work,
Contract Academic Staff,
University of City in the Prairies
Prairie Province
CANADA

~~To Whom It May Concern:~~
~~To All It SHOULD Concern:~~
To **YOU** [Insert YOUR name here: _____],

I am writing a complaint, a strongly worded letter, if you will. Yet before I even begin to articulate what pulls me to the page to express my outrage and anxiety, I already need to formally complain about how I begin this letter: "To Whom It May Concern." This seems too generic and too easy to dismiss. "To Whom it May Concern" can easily be shrugged away to mean someone else. It acts as a convention of writing etiquette, a way to name an unknown recipient or multiple recipients. Yet, in the polite and formal address, the recipient remains unnamed, and can quite easily and quickly justify that this letter, this complaint, and the hard critical thinking and call to action (or at least call to further thought and reflection, which *I* consider to be important action) contained within it is not really meant for him or her. Since this letter *may* concern someone else, let "whom" deal with it. So perhaps I should do an edit. What if I try "To All It SHOULD Concern"? Because I have come to this place where I am writing a strongly worded letter because I think there are far more people who SHOULD be concerned about how teachers, students, families, and community members are experiencing schools. In fact, I cannot think of anyone who SHOULD not be concerned about education experiences. So maybe I should try again. To YOU. You insert your name now. Whether you

are a teacher, student, parent, school administrator, teacher educator, education researcher, or community member, you NEED to be concerned. This letter is for you.

Before I go forward and name the specifics of my complaint, I need first to go back to acknowledge I was inspired to pen my strongly worded letter because of a rich tradition of complaints and confessions throughout literature. In the fifteenth century, a poet and privy seal clerk named Thomas Hoccleve compiled a book called the *Series.* In the beginning of the book, the narrator (who is also named Thomas Hoccleve) confesses that he had been suffering from melancholy, or what was known in his day as the "thoughtful maladie." Melancholy was the condition thought to be responsible for the loss of memory and the inability to make meaning. It was believed to have been caused by too much time devoted to study and thought. In the opening scenes of the *Series,* Thomas examines himself in a mirror, searching for signs in his face and body that will show that he has recovered from his condition. As he looks at himself in the mirror, he decides that if he makes a book and compiles a variety of poetry alongside his own complaints and confessions that he will be able to prove to others (and to himself) that he has moved beyond his melancholy.

Following this tradition, I suppose I should begin my complaint as Thomas begins his. Perhaps I should claim to be looking into a mirror, searching my face and body for evidence of my recovery from the melancholy I have recently been experiencing when I think of the bullying, alienation, and troubling encounters that happen in our Canadian, and specifically, prairie school systems. Alas, I am not currently sitting in front of a mirror, but if I peer at the right angle I can see myself reflected in the screen of my laptop. I also rehearsed some of what I would write in this letter as I stood in front of my mirror while blow-drying my hair (hoping the blast of hot air would warm up the hair, skull, and brain beneath and somehow melt the

inner-censor that often stops me from articulating what causes me concern). Now I sit writing on my bed, I can see through my window to where my daughter and her friend glide on a reflective sheet of ice that composes our backyard rink. Mirrors surround me as I complain and confess. I cannot escape self-reflection.

Yet, I paused here for a long time. Not sure if I could keep typing. Not sure if I knew what to say next. It is not that I have never complained before. I am a teacher, after all. I think teachers, and now I'm going to start making some generalizations based on my experiences, are pretty comfortable with complaining. Teachers, myself included, have complained about class sizes, hours of work, expectations of parents and society, the level of engagement and responsibility of students, amount of pay compared to other professions (including professional hockey players), pressures of standardized exams and complicated report cards, lack of social assistance and support at systemic levels for their students and families, increasing demands for teachers to meet complex individual needs of students, lack of recognition and respect from the community, broken photocopiers, bad coffee in the staffroom, and the isolation of not having enough time to talk and learn alongside fellow teachers. Teachers are known for being "complainers": I have often heard people I know well talk about how teachers "who get paid more than other hard-working people, seem never to get fired, get off at 3:30, and have every summer off" are "whining" again, especially when negotiations of contracts become public through the media. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) the public perception of teachers as whiners and complainers, I think there is actually a strong reluctance for many teachers to publically share and declare their deepest concerns and most pressing worries. I think teachers are most comfortable complaining if they feel these complaints will remain within a trusted circle of peers or family who will ensure a level or privacy or professionalism. If they do

complain officially and publically, it often only happens when teachers can collectively (often through unions and provincial teacher associations) join many others so their own individual stories can remain as an anonymous addition to a choir of complaints.

Who wants to be known as the pessimistic, "woe is me" Eeyore of society, or the trouble-maker, or the unappreciative? We *chose* to be teachers (or teacher educators), after all. There is currently a surplus of teachers (and teacher educators) who are educated, idealistic, and eager to start their careers in schools and classrooms. How can we justify complaining? Maybe it is not that bad. Maybe we should be more grateful for what we have. Maybe we are just tired and need Christmas vacation, March Break (or Reading Week), or the summer (depending on the time of year we are feeling the most concerned). Maybe after a little break our reason for complaining will look and feel better. Maybe we are the only ones who have this concern. Maybe no one else finds our complaint troubling. Maybe we are just looking at this situation with too much emotion and too little logic. Maybe we are just too new to the profession to "see the big picture" or maybe we are too long in this profession and we are "burnt out." Maybe if we voice our complaint we will be asked to fix it. Maybe we don't want to raise the concern when we really have no idea how to begin proposing the solutions. Maybe we don't want to be asked to be on another committee, professional learning community, or working group. Maybe we'd like a little more time with our friends, family, and finding balance in our lives to experience our own wellbeing. Maybe we should just shut up and suck it up, buttercup.

After quite a few years in graduate school, I have learned a new way to complain. I remain somewhat anonymous in my personal concerns, fears, anxieties, and despair if I voice my complaint through academic Discourse. I have learned that most of the concerns that fuel

my desire to engage in research and inquiry are not really all that unique after all. In fact, most of the time there are many other people with similar concerns and questions who have engaged in various approaches and studies of similar topics. Here is the complaint that largely fuels this dissertation: I am deeply concerned about how students, teachers, families, and community members experience schools when we currently lack the desire and supports to create truly authentic and diverse spaces for all individuals on the spectrums of genders and sexualities. But I am not the only one with this concern! I am not the first. I am usually not the most articulate and certainly not the most experienced. So, I can seek the support of "the literature." I can make my own personal belief public, but I can do so through the words of others. I can write, Soandso and Another (2013) state: "Quote from a peer-reviewed journal article that says what I'm thinking or supports my point of view" (p. #). I have the sixth edition of APA to help guide me in this Discourse. I have the fear of losing my degrees and being banished from academia under the shameful cloud of plagiarism if I make too many claims without acknowledging the many others who have made these claims before me, who shape my opinions, and who have already made it into publication. I have a hard time saying just about anything now without looking for a quote from someone else that I can integrate into my opinion and strengthen my claim. I re-read the two previous paragraphs and I know that with the right data base and enough time I could find many names and dates to put in brackets behind almost everything I have written. There are certainly many studies that could support or discuss the complaints teachers may have and/or their reasons for believing they should not complain. Am I doing my job as a PhD candidate if I do not put brackets with multiple names and dates behind each of my own lived experiences? Who will I alienate if I do not include these academic conventions? But who might I turn off if I do?

Earlier in this strongly worded letter I confessed that I paused for a long time before I could begin writing the next paragraph. Now I must confess again that I paused even longer after that last paragraph you just read. My daughter and her friend finished skating, came inside and warmed up with hot chocolate, and then days passed, weeks went by, the rink melted, eventually the grass began to green, and now when I look out the window there are leaves draping the trees and flowers blooming in the garden. I didn't just sit and think for minutes, I sat and thought for months. I practiced what I might say next in front of a variety of different mirrors (ones in my bathroom and books that I was reading and friends that I talked to about what I was thinking), but my complaint never seemed quite right and I never felt able to commit anything to paper. I could have returned to the page today and pretended that no time had passed. You, recipient and reader of this letter, would have been none the wiser. But, my pause of an entire season is perhaps a very telling part of this story.

I am complaining as much about what teachers *do not tell* as I am complaining about how we experience schools. I am complaining that teachers and teacher educators have troubling, yet potentially transformative experiences in their classrooms and with their students, but there is not time, space, or support to tell about these experiences. I do not mean a telling of the experience to vent or entertain or even confess, but to tell in order to seek meaning, examine ourselves critically, and engage in the processes of *learning* and *intentional becoming.* When teacher-researchers talk, think, write, and make meaning in a variety of modes about themselves and their own experiences, they are often accused of "navel gazing" and self-indulgence. After writing a candidacy exam question looking at how self-study is often deemed self-indulgent, I personally feel far more at peace with that accusation. I could pull out quotes, brackets, dates, and scholarly references to support my claim that unless we examine ourselves

and do the hard work of trying to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct our experiences then it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to live and act as critically engaged citizens.

Although I think some of us are stopped by the worry that others will see us as self-indulgent, I think far more of us are silenced by the fear that others will hear the stories we tell and see us uncaring, incompetent, or unprofessional. If we tell about the tensions and troubles in our classrooms, we leave ourselves vulnerable to public scrutiny. We invite others to critically read our actions and the philosophies that (un)consciously shaped our choices in these encounters. When we tell, we may think we control what and how we tell, but we cannot control how others will "read," respond, and react to our pedagogical choices. Telling stories when we are not the hero, when we do not save the day, when we are bewildered, baffled, or bleeding (inside or out) is really, really scary. So scary in fact that I fear I will walk away from this letter and either (a) not return until my children are carving pumpkins or gliding on the ice in the backyard again or (b) leave the page permanently.

Yet I will persevere for one "concluding" paragraph, a paragraph that concludes nothing at all, but keeps the conventional name simply because it is the last paragraph in this particular letter. I set out to write a letter of complaint about genders and sexualities diversity (or lack of diversity) in schools, but it has turned into a complaint about complaints. My complaint is that teachers are reluctant (often for very good reasons) to tell about and invite critical "readings" of their troubling and discomforting experiences in schools. But I think these two complaints, the intended complaint and the emergent complaint, are inextricably linked. There are some stories (some complaints) we are conditioned to believe are okay to live and tell. We are conditioned by the norms of our societies, cultures, and past experiences. Yet sometimes we live and experience stories that are "queer"—that don't fit the expected or accepted scripts and stories

of schools and societies. And I think these are the stories that we are conditioned to believe should be silenced. These stories might "out" us and might "out" what is not working for many individuals in our society. These stories might "out" our taken-for-granted privileges and the inequities of power that exist all around us. I "conclude" by inviting you to leave this letter, but keep reading by entering into a different forms of my confessional life writing where I tell stories I would really rather not tell. I invite you alongside me as I take action and try to "out" myself and "queer" one of my classroom experiences. I also invite you to bring one of your untold encounters within a school context and set it metaphorically alongside mine as you read my narrative. Perhaps I extend this invitation because my vulnerability begs me to find sympathetic readers, but perhaps it is because I believe we "read" and "interpret" narratives through the frames and lenses of our own stories and experiences. I believe it might just be through this willingness to get scared and be vulnerable that we might discover the courage it takes to be critically reflexive and the bravery to complain and begin to make real changes to how schools are experienced by all.

Sincerely,
~~Jennifer Watt, Doctoral Candidate~~
Jen

Raising the White Flag on "Cancer is Battle" Metaphor

From my journal: Oct. 28, 2013

Since my diagnosis (or the beginning stages of working towards a diagnosis), I have been troubled by the "cancer is battle" metaphor. People I love, admire, and appreciate say encouraging, loving things to me that still leave me uncomfortable. But I try to, as Kumashiro (2010) writes, "bear being uncomfortable for a while" (p. 31). Here are some of the comments I hear and read and wonder about:

- "You're so strong. You'll beat this."
- "You'll beat the sh*! out of cancer."
- "You're ready for the cancer battle."
- "You can fight this. You're young. You're in great shape. Cancer won't know what hit it."
- "You are a warrior. A brave booby warrior. You'll beat this."

I feel gratitude for the intentions behind these words and images, but I guess this "battle" metaphor is one that just doesn't connect with the way I have lived and the way I want to live.

Perhaps I am part/all pacifist. I cringe at gun play and "accidentally" sweep up as many of the miniscule Lego guns that come with the children's play sets as possible. I am okay if the kids pretend they have tools that freeze or soak or put to sleep in their games, but I go a bit crazy when I hear them threaten to "kill" each other or make grand claims that the other is "dead." Battles, to me, are in no way glamorous, in no way desirable.

I think the part that particularly gets to me when I think about cancer is the idea that there are winners or losers. "After a brave battle with cancer, we have lost our dear mother, sister . . . " If I die, am I a "loser'? Did cancer "win"? Did I not "fight" hard enough? Was the "battle" just too tough?

It makes me angry. This metaphor makes me angry. Thinking about needing to get ready for "battle," needing to "fight" makes me sad and mad. I feel inauthentic—like I am forced to do and be something that I despise and abhor.

I want to live and die in peace and joy. I am now a survivor who is getting treatment because cells in my body misbehaved and have been named cancer. I don't want these cells in my body. I don't want them to grow or spread anywhere else. I need help from medicine, radiology, surgery, hormones, movement, nutrition, mindfulness practices, laughter, love, and more in order to do everything possible to slow, or hopefully, halt the growth and spread of these misbehaving cells.

I do not want to spend my days in battle. If these are amongst my last years or decades (or hopefully in the midst of many more years and decades), I do not want to live fighting or die in battle. I have read enough about wars to know that life in a battle zone is not enriching, safe, or joy-filled. I'd like to die at peace, in peace. I'm not saying I want this to be a passive process, but I truly want to face death with the same face and grace as I live life. I don't like going to bed in a fight with those I love. I don't like going to bed or waking up angry. Why be angry with cancer? Okay. Sometimes I will be very angry with cancer. But the cancer has grown within me and I am not willing to wage battle with my own body.

Instead, I search for a different, more empowering, more life-and-death affirming metaphor. What about cancer as teacher? I have much to learn about myself, about others, about resiliency, gratitude, dedication, strength, wisdom, patience, love, acceptance, compassion, empathy, trust, privilege, pain, suffering, silence, support, care. If I am busy "beating" cancer than am I learning from cancer? Now this is a slippery slope because this could come into a "blame the patient" or "cancer as a moral punishment" kind of Discourse.

There is a dangerous kind of thinking where people assume something must have been wrong with the way you were living or being—you needed to learn, so you were given cancer. I'm pretty sure cancer is not a moral indicator or a karmic gift. I think cancer is abnormal cell growth. I really do. Yet, I think in every experience we have an opportunity to learn. I am experiencing abnormal and invasive cell growth. It would be such a waste of an experience if I do not look for the opportunities to learn from it.

Herein lies a strong connection to the work of my dissertation. Here I am as a learner that was in temporary balance, but crisis knocked me off balance. I am experiencing the discomfort of the crash, a destabilization of my body, and the world is suddenly not what it seemed moments before (Short & Burke, 1991). I have been reading and writing about discomfort for a few years now. I think again of Kumashiro (2010): "When students confront discomforting information what activities, conversations, readings, or experiences can help them bear being uncomfortable for a while?" (p. 31) I am facing treatments that will invariably bring discomfort. How do I bear it? And by bearing it, by experiencing, by mindfully living through, by opening myself to the opportunity to learn from the experience, what will transform for me in the months of treatment and recovery?

There is likely more to say, but the duvet is so warm and my black cat has nestled herself against my leg and is purring in unabashed contentment. My eyelids droop. This does not feel in any way a battle zone. I don't want to fight this. I don't want to fight sleep. And, without wanting to alarm anyone I love, I don't want to fight cancer. I want to do everything I can to rid myself of cancer cells, but I don't want to fight the experience. I want to experience the experience. Let it teach me. Let it teach others. Let it be. And tonight, let it be peaceful dreams

and restorative rest. Tomorrow is a new day. More waiting. More comforts and discomforts. More loving. Let it be.

CHAPTER FOUR
Practising Mindfulness

Practising Mindfulness

In a very real sense, you are embarking on what I hope will be an ongoing adventure of inquiry and discovery about the nature of your mind and heart and how you might live with greater presence, openheartedness, and authenticity—not merely for yourself, but for your interconnected embeddedness with those you love, with all beings, and with the world itself. (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p. 5)

As we ponder educational purposes, we might take into account the possibility that the main point of education (in the context of a lived life) is to enable a human being to become increasingly mindful with regard to his or her lived situation—and its untapped possibilities. (Greene, 1995, p. 181)

Regardless of how we get there, either through meditation or more directly by paying attention to novelty and questioning assumptions, to be mindful is to be present, noticing all the wonders we didn't realize were right in front of us. (Langer, 2003, p. xxv)

What the practice of mindfulness offers us is a way to be in relationship to this enormity, to this poignancy, and to the particulars of the narrative—even when it seems impossible for us or anyone else to do anything. It invites us to be willing, over and over again in the face of even our own overwhelm, reluctance, and despair to turn *toward* what we most want to turn away from. It invites us to accept what seems beyond accepting and to experiment with embracing the actuality of it with a sense of enormous kindness toward ourselves. This is a practice—one that can only unfold over time. (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p. 99)

At the very least, participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed. (Greene, 1995, p. 123)

In the previous two chapters, I have focused on life writing practices that have allowed me to stay open to and remain engaged within moments of vulnerability and discomfort that inevitably arise in teaching, learning, and life. In this chapter, I turn my attention to how practices of mindfulness, or deliberate and reflective awareness, invite me to value, connect, and deepen educational encounters. When I began to think of how I have practiced mindfulness throughout my teaching career, I gathered various pieces of writing or art, which I remembered enabling me to feel particularly "wide awake" (Greene, 1995). As I re-read, re-viewed, and re-searched the *individual* pieces, I was re-minded of what I was paying attention to and how I was making meaning in those separate moments. Yet it was within the process of re-reading, re-viewing, and re-searching these pieces as a *collective* where I experienced startling realizations about practising mindfulness as a teacher. I had not expected or intended to create a chronological narrative of how one mindful aesthetic experience influenced and invited the next writing or visual art making experience, but the process of juxtaposing the pieces revealed these new strands of connections. Now I could tell new stories about how and why I *practised* and *documented* mindfulness to make sense of experiences and to deepen my reflective capacities as a teacher. In the introduction to this chapter, I first explore how I came to know and understand mindfulness through my writing practices and aesthetic education experiences. Next, I describe how I came to practise mindfulness as a way to live with uncertainty during my experience with cancer. Finally, I explore how writing and making art can be a powerful practice of *mindfulness* in a present moment and *re-mindfulness* for later, connected, reflective learning. Following my narrative of how I have come to conceptualize and theorize mindfulness, I give brief descriptions of the pieces that compose the remainder of this "Practising Mindfulness" strand.

Reverent Writing Practices and Wide Awakenings

Long before I recognized (and could name) the concept of mindfulness, I recognized (and could name) myself as a writer. Writing has been one of my life-long practices. Sometimes my writing practices are sustained and disciplined as when I have sat down lovingly with a stack of Christmas or thank you cards that need to be mailed immediately; or when I faithfully planted my bum in a chair for many hours each day working on my dissertation; or when I chronicled each round of chemotherapy in careful detail for future reference and remembrance. Other times my writing practices are more sporadic and spontaneous like when I have written fiercely in my journal when consumed by rage, shame, or joy; or when I have written frantically on planes on the way home from academic conferences, my brain bursting with new ideas; or when I have written and sketched extravagantly detailed observations of people and places in familiar or foreign landscapes. Cameron (1998) notices:

> Observed closely enough, all of life is interesting. The practice of writing teaches this. All of life is filled with drama. Observed closely, small moments have large impact. They are like the small variations as we move scale to scale in piano practice. The eye, like the ear, becomes trained to nuance by consistent attention. . . . When we practice the art of close observation, we gain an emotional palette that has more shades, more possibilities, than the screaming extremes of black and white headlines declaring catastrophe and crisis. (p. 174)

It is through the close observations enabled by my writing practices that I have come to experience and understand Kabat-Zinn's (2012) definition that "mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (p. 1). The part of the definition about being non-judgmental

is my biggest challenge as a writer (and human being), but it is also the aspect of mindfulness that I most aspire to develop. Like Kabat-Zinn, "ultimately, I see mindfulness as a love affair—with life, with reality, and imagination, with the beauty of your own being, with your heart and body and mind, and with the world" (p. 2). I similarly believe teaching is a mindful affair of love—I experience being in love with life, imagination, and the beauty of the hearts, minds, and spirits of the students I encounter.

I believe reading is inextricably linked with writing and that it is within the fluid movement between both practices that mindfulness stirs. Lamott (1994) argues that there is reverence, which is akin to mindfulness, within reading and writing:

> I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here? Let's think of reverence as awe, as presence in and openness to the world . . . Think of those times when you've read prose or poetry that is presented in such a way that you have a fleeting sense of being *startled* by beauty or insight, by a glimpse into someone's soul. All of a sudden everything seems to fit together or at least to have some meaning for a moment. (pp. 99-100)

Lamott is most thankful for how writers provoke attention: "we may notice amazing details during the course of a day but we rarely let ourselves stop and really pay attention. An author *makes* you notice, makes you pay attention, and this is a great gift. My gratitude for good writing is unbounded" (p. 15). So is mine. I think this is one of the more profound reasons why I taught English Language Arts to junior and senior high school students—I felt a need to share my gratitude of reading and writing and marvel over these gifts with others. I had experienced how "one of the gifts of being a writer is that it gives you an excuse to do things, to go places, and explore. Another is that writing motivates you to look closely at life, at life as it lurches by

and tramps around" (Lamott, p. xii). I wanted to give students (and myself) more excuses to do things, go places, lurch, tramp, and look closely at life. I wholeheartedly believe that "there is a door we all want to walk through, and writing can help you find it and open it. Writing can give you what having a baby can give you: it can get you to start paying attention, can help you soften, can wake you up" (Lamott, p. 13). In the pieces that come later in this chapter, I share pieces of writing—especially in the poetry—where I took the excuse to go, lurch, soften, and wake up to the world around me.

My love affair with the processes of paying attention, softening, and waking up through reading and writing, and later the teaching of reading and writing, foreshadowed my on-the-page meeting of educational and aesthetic philosopher Maxine Greene. When I was first introduced to Greene's work, I felt a distinct sense of aha, of coming home, of listening to someone tell distinctly familiar, yet fascinatingly novel stories of what I knew and believed, but could not yet put into words. Greene (2001) describes teaching as "a lifelong quest, a lifelong project" (p. 70). She says that teachers like artists, "are always in process, always seeking ways of reaching others and moving others to come alive, to think about their thinking, to create meanings, to transform their worlds" (p. 70). She believes that "the teacher open to the mystery, open to the wonder, open to the questions, is the one who can light the slow fuse of possibility even for the defeated ones, the bored ones, the deserted ones" (p. 146) For Greene, it is informed and participatory encounters with the arts that invites this fuse lighting and awakening for both teachers and students. Greene advocates for aesthetic education, which she defines as:

> an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what there is to be

> noticed, and to lend works of art their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this happens, new connections are made in experience: new patterns are formed, new vistas opened. (p. 6)

She contrasts the concept of aesthetic education with Dewey's notion that "the opposite of 'aesthetic' is 'anaesthetic'" (p. x). "Anaesthesia," for Greene, "implies numbness, an emotional incapacity, and this can immobilize, prevent people from questioning, from meeting the challenges of being in and naming and (perhaps) transforming the world" (p. x). Instead she calls for a "wide-awakeness" that comes from attending to and participating in the arts—"a more active, responsible, ardent mode of pursuing our human quests" (p. 111). Engaging in the arts allow us to wake up, see what is around us, and deeply notice our connections to each other and the world.

Greene's vision for aesthetic education is very much in line with how psychologist Ellen Langer (2003) describes the connection between mindfulness and creativity:

> Many, if not all, of the qualities that make up a mindful attitude are characteristic of creative people. Those who can free themselves of old mindsets . . . , who can open themselves to new information and surprise, play with perspective and context, and focus on process rather than outcome are likely to be creating whether they are scientists, artists, or cooks. (p. 113)

She argues that "we typically consider creativity and innovation, whether at work or in the arts, as the province of a few, however, mindfulness can encourage creativity when the focus is on the process and not the product" (Langer, 2003, pp. xi-xii). This parallels Greene's (1995) argument that "the focus" of aesthetic education encounters should be "on the process and

practice" because "the skill in the making is embodied in the object" (p. 131). As often as possible, she wants students to *participate* in these processes and practices:

> When students can share in learning the language of dance by moving as dancers move, entering the symbol system of novel writing and story weaving by composing their own narratives out of words, working with glass, sounds, or drums to find out what it signifies to shape the medium of sound, all these immediate involvements lead to a participant kind of engagement with art forms themselves. Aesthetic education ought to include adventures like these just as it ought to include intentional efforts to foster increasingly informed and ardent encounters with artworks. (Greene, p. 137)

Important to my work in this dissertation, Greene (2001) also argues that *teachers* need to fully adventure into their own practices, processes, and play in the arts if they are to offer authentic aesthetic education to their students:

> Teachers will only be in a position to make such experiences available to your students if you take the time to cultivate your own informed awareness, if you allow *your* own minds to be activated, *your* feelings to be aroused, *your* imagination to be released for the sake of bringing these works into being for yourselves. (Greene, p. 46)

Throughout my processes of making this dissertation, I have participated in a variety of arts-based practices—some that were familiar and comforting (like writing) and others that were unfamiliar and, at times, discomforting (like my forays into visual art-making). I participated in these practices not as an art project, but rather as a teaching project. I am a teacher who believes that, "Art offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light" (Greene, 1995, p. 135). As a teacher educator, I want to come from the very authentic, and sometimes vulnerable, position as a practising artist-teacher. I want to empathetically

encourage teacher education students to take the risks that are involved in becoming truly wide-awake to the wonder of playing and practising in the arts, so that they, in turn, can know new ways to waken their students.

Uncertainty and Mindfulness

I searched for new understandings of mindfulness practices when I was diagnosed with cancer. Life was suddenly both more uncertain and more precious than I had ever experienced it before. Living with cancer, which was not an option, became a wake-up call and a potential teacher:

> Anything and everything can become our teacher of the moment, reminding us of the possibility of being fully present: the gentle caress of air on our skin, the play of light, the look on someone's face, a passing contraction in the body, a fleeting thought in the mind. Anything. Everything. If it is met in awareness. (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p. 55)

I wanted to meet cancer in awareness, but to do so the intellectual in me believed I first needed to develop more awareness of awareness. Learning to live with cancer and to live through mindfulness became my *currere* (Pinar & Grumet, 1976). As Kabat-Zinn (2012) writes, "The 'curriculum' of this adventure we call living, where mindfulness can play such a pivotal role, is always what is unfolding in this moment, whether we like what is happening or not" (p. 115). I did not particularly like having cancer, but it was happening. So I wondered, what was within this experience, this present that could help me learn about living, fear, beauty, love, and death?

Experiences of dying, or living with illnesses that have the potential to kill us more immediately than we had previously imagined, have become "curricular" prompts for many who practice and write about mindfulness. In an introduction to Mark Nepo's (2000) book of daily reflections called *The Book of Awakening,* Wayne Muller writes:

> Mark had cancer, and it shook him awake. His descent into illness gave birth to an astonishing mindfulness. Now, he invites us to use his eyes and heart to see and feel how awake our being alive can be. Having survived his cancer, Mark brings with him the eyes of a dying person who is grateful simply to breathe. But more than gratefulness he brings wisdom, clarity, kindness, and a passionate enthusiasm for sucking the marrow out of moments, out of the bones of time. (p. ix)

Affect scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) explains that when she received a midlife diagnosis of metastatic cancer she began studying and practising mindfulness through Buddhist traditions and Western adaptations (p. 156). She writes:

> Perhaps nothing dramatizes the distance between knowledge and realization as efficiently as diagnosis with a fatal disease. As advertised, it does concentrate the mind wonderfully (even by shattering it) and makes inescapably vivid the distance between *knowing* that one will die and *realizing* it. (pp. 173 - 174)

Most of us are aware, most of us know, that we, and our love ones, will die. Yet it is the intimate uncertainty of moments when death is suddenly close that we can open and realize a new way of being present in life. Although not a patient herself, Anne Lamott (1994) writes about her intimate role supporting both her father and her best friend through their processes of dying from cancer. Despite the pain of these endeavours, she graciously received and now teaches lessons about the mindfulness that becomes possible from being so awake to death: "To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way, full in the way that life is for children. They spend big round hours" (p. 179). I recognize that my years in cancer treatment and recovery have

been filled with big round hours. I have spent many of these hours studying and practising ways to mindfully live (and/or die) with an authentic sense of wellbeing:

> Mindfulness as a practice provides endless opportunities to cultivate greater intimacy with your own mind and to tap into and develop your deep interior resources for learning, growing, healing, and potentially for transforming your understanding of who you are and how you might live more wisely and with greater well-being, meaning, and happiness in this world. (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p. 4)

Through cancer, there was, and continues to be, endless opportunities for coming to know more about learning, growing, and healing.

Like all other aspects of this dissertation, I deliberately come to the study of mindfulness from a beginner's stance: I claim no expertise on Eastern or Western philosophies about mindfulness and humbly admit my reading so far has only been dipping the very tip of my toe in a vast ocean of wisdom traditions. Yet, I *know* when I sat, monk-like, with my head bald from chemotherapy I felt a deep kinship and a soul-level recognition of the wisdom within Buddhist teachings. In an essay called "Pedagogy of Buddhism," Sedgwick (2003) explains how "'sounds true' is a good description of how it feels to assent to or learn from these [Buddhist] teachings. It describes mainly an exchange of recognition—at best, of surprising recognition" (p. 165). She further elaborates that "the teachings one gravitates to sound true because they are true, and that certain people, Eastern and Western, simply recognize them as such through some kind of individual access to an ahistorical/world-overarching stratum of the *philosipha premis*" (p. 166). She argues that often Western approaches to teaching assume that knowledge is something new that must be discovered, whereas a Buddhist approach assumes that knowledge is something already there to be uncovered. There is no tension in learning

what one already knows: "In Buddhist pedagogical thought, however, the apparent tautology of learning what you already know does not seem to constitute a paradox, nor an impasse, nor a scandal. It is not even a problem. If anything, it is a deliberate and defining practice" (Sedgwick, p. 166). She notices how "colloquially, though only colloquially, even English differentiates among, say, being exposed to a given idea or proposition, catching on to it, taking it seriously, having it sink in, and wrapping your mind around it. In Buddhist thought the space of such differences is central" (p. 167). From a Buddhist pedagogical perspective, it becomes a life-journey, a *currere* (Pinar & Grumet, 1976) to learn and re-learn, know, and then realize that knowing. As Sedgwick (2003) explains, "To go from *knowing* something to *realizing* it . . . is seen as a densely processual undertaking that can requires years or life times" (p. 167). I believe it is somewhere in that dense process where we cultivate wisdom.

I have only started the dense process of realization and cultivating wisdom. Yet even in these beginning stages there have been many joyful moments of "surprising recognition" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 165). I now see how my exposure to Greene's concept of "wide awakeness" became my grounding for how I read, discovered, and uncovered some of the Buddhist teachings about mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) teaches us that "the root word "budh" means to wake up, to know, to understand. A person who wakes up and understands is called a Buddha. It is as simple as that. The capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love is called Buddha nature" (p. 23). Kabat-Zinn (2012) also writes, "The Buddha himself symbolizes the embodiment of wakefulness. The very title, "the Buddha," means, in Pali—the language in which his teachings were first written down—*the one who awakened"* (p. 22). Kabat-Zinn looks further to Asian languages for more insight into practising this awakened mindfulness:

> In many Asian languages, the word for "mind" and the word for "heart" is the same word. So when you hear the word "mindfulness," you have to hear the word "heartfulness" simultaneously to understand what mindfulness really is. That is why mindfulness is sometimes described as an *affectionate attention* and why I encourage you to approach practice with a very light touch, bringing an attitude of gentleness and compassion to yourself at every turn. (p. 79)

The reminders for gentleness, compassion, love, and joy in awakening through mindfulness practices are repeated often within the wisdom traditions. I connected to these reminders when I read for hope and healing in my time of uncertainty and discomfort. I wanted to see beauty, experience joy, and laugh loudly, not in spite of cancer, but because cancer was part of everything else in my present moment.

I learned meditation and mindfulness practices were not only available to the deeply serious, incredibly patient, or naturally still (which is a very good thing because I can assure you I am none of those things). Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) teaches, "Life is both dreadful and wonderful. To practice meditation is to be in touch with both aspects. Please do not think we must be solemn to meditate. In fact, to meditate well, we have to smile a lot" (p. 14). I could do that. I could smile a lot. Pema Chödrön (2003) writes:

> The key is to be here fully connected with the details of our lives, paying attention. We are expressing appreciation: friendship toward ourselves and toward the living quality that is found in everything. This combination of mindfulness and appreciation connects us fully with reality and brings us joy. When we extend attention and appreciation toward our environment and other people, our experience of joy expands even further. (p. 76)

Awakening, practising mindfulness, and cultivating my gratitude and joy did not change the fact I *had* cancer, but it did change *how* I experienced cancer. Now, as I have returned to my research and my teaching of teacher education students, my awakening, practising, and cultivating has continued to change *how* I experience educational encounters.

There is a growing interdisciplinary, scholarly interest in how mindfulness practices can be integrated into educational contexts, especially for the purposes of sustainable wellbeing. Eppert and Vosky (2012) explain:

> In our understanding, contemplative studies is a cross-disciplinary field of inquiry into the teaching offered and embodied by ancient wisdom texts and traditions, including their contemporary forms. We are particularly drawn to those wisdom traditions in which mind, body, and spirit are recognized as vitally interconnected, as are self, others, and the world; and in which cultivating wisdom involves practising disciplines of the mind in/with the body, in community as well as in solitude. Contemplative studies considers what possibilities such teachings and disciplines might open for rethinking contemporary educational theories, policies and practices in light of today's socio-political and environmental challenges. (p. 1)

In particular, they argue that "inquiry into and communication across wisdom traditions promises greater insights into what specific forms of individual and collective transformation may give rise to more just, compassionate, and sustainable ways of life" (p. 1). Some of the more just, compassionate, and sustainable ways of life can begin for individual teachers (and their students) when mindfulness practices are consciously and intentionally integrated into their teaching. Falkenberg (2012) writes:

> In the Western tradition, teaching has always been seen as a moral endeavour . . . and, whatever the differences in detail, at the core of the conceptualization of teaching has always been the recognition that teaching is properly done for the betterment of others—the students—and that the teacher's decisions, actions, and behaviour are central to the moral endeavor. (p. 27)

Considering his own teaching and meditation practices, Falkenberg observes, "through my own reflective processes as a teacher educator, I have noticed the importance for my teaching of both what I am aware of (and am often not aware of) as I teach and the habitual and automatic behaviour routines in my teaching" (p. 26). Falkenberg argues that "mindful awareness in teaching as contemplative professional practice provides the practitioner with the awareness of her inner life *while teaching*" (p. 31). It is my hope that by practising mindfulness I will be able to cultivate a great awareness of my inner life both while I am teaching and when I am later thinking about my teaching in connection with other experiences.

Practising (Re)mindfulness

The vain part of me wishes I could tell a neat and tidy story about how I learned about mindfulness through writing, next through art-making and aesthetic education experiences, finally through illness and wisdom traditions, and therefore I could fully awaken in my teaching practices, and I lived happily ever after in a Zen-like state of calm acceptance and balance. The vulnerable part of me cannot tell that story. Because it is just not true. Nor is it very helpful—for me or anyone else.

After my year's leave of absence from work and studies, I returned to both my research and teaching of teacher education students. I was wide-awake and so very grateful to be back doing both. So grateful, in fact, that I had a very difficult time mindfully choosing a healthy

amount of teaching and research projects that would still allow my body, mind, and spirit (and the bodies, minds, and spirits of my family) to heal and recover. As I committed to more work contracts, my time and space for my meditative practices of writing, walking, yoga, and art-making decreased (or in some cases vanished altogether). Intellectually, I understood and was sympathetic to my decisions to re-enter the flow of life so fully. I was grateful to be here. Grateful to be breathing. Deeply grateful to be teaching and writing. Teaching and writing connected me with a life and identity that existed before cancer and made me feel less of a patient and more of a person. Physically, my body was not ready for the pace I thought I could manage. By spring of the first year post-cancer, I was exhausted. I stepped back. I stopped. I chose to let go of some of my work contracts and not give into temptations to apply for or accept more. I returned to my mindfulness practices. But, in the spirit of disclosure that is inherent in this dissertation, I was filled with fear because I worried cancer was back, and was disappointed in myself because I had not heeded the lessons I thought I had learned. I was right back to feeling vulnerable and right back to feeling discomfort. Yet this is an introduction to a strand about practising mindfulness, not despair, so here is a moment of awakening that I captured in my journal:

Last time I was writing in my journal, I was prompted not by peace, but by agitation. I was beginning to tell of my breakdown/breakthrough as I realized I had taken on too much and I was striving too hard. I was frustrated that I had forgotten or abandoned my practices of self-care and compassion that had become central to my living, healing, and growing last year during my journey with cancer. Yet I do realize now, as I try to sort through the ups and downs of the past few months in the most compassionate way I can, I neither abandoned nor forgot all

my practices. I was walking, talking, writing, and engaging in self-care. I was sleeping and taking time to be with those I love.

I think what maybe happened was that I was doing the practices, but sometimes I was not really mindfully engaging. I see it in my children's music practice. Some days they are just putting in time—they rush through their pieces, ask if they are done yet, or start telling stories that seem fairly random. Both of their wise and wonderful music teachers encourage mindful practice. Practice that is thoughtful, deliberate, noticed. It does not need to be sustained for long periods of time (in fact that kind of mindful attention is often difficult to sustain for long), but it does need to be mindful.

As I was walking this morning, I started to tell a familiar story about myself. I started to call myself a familiar name. I called myself a "slow learner." I had begun my walk feeling agitated—I have eight of my daughter's friends coming over for a sleepover on Friday, my husband leaves the next day for a research trip to England—had I done it to myself again? Had I taken on too much? Would I be able to physically, mentally and emotionally keep up? Why was I such a slow learner? I was so caught up about my worries about the end of the week and my name calling that I was missing this beautiful June morning that I was being offered.

Neatly, for narrative purposes, the writer in me might like to recall a lovely or unexpected disruption—a melodic birdcall, the sudden break of light through the leafy canopy above. The only thing I can vividly recall was an angry sounding squirrel protesting in a tree quite near my ear-height. Yet this squirrel's chattering and nattering may or may not have been the moment where I began to tell myself a different story and call myself a different name. Somewhere along the path this morning, however, I did have a moment of in-sight—sudden noticing of something within me.

The new story I began to tell myself happened when I deliberately removed the word "slow" from my name. I am a learner—no adjective required. Learning doesn't happen at a set pace. It doesn't happen all at once. Learning often means re-learning in a new context. Learning is integrating previous knowledge in a new situation, or within a changed relationship, or applying it within a shifted context. Learning is about repetition and practice. Repetition and practice may sound rote or mechanical, but it can be the grounding for artistry.

I am not a slow learner. I am a learner. As a learner I need to constantly remind myself of my practices.

Remind myself.

Re-mind myself.

Mind myself again.

Return to mindfulness.

Practice (re)mindfulness.

I was so busy telling myself off, labeling myself a slow learner, immersing myself in my discomfort, agitation, and exhaustion that I forgot compassion. So I re-minded myself. These past few weeks of letting go, shifting expectations, being gentle . . . they have been practices of re-minding.

I returned to writing this strand of "Practising Mindfulness" in mid-August after a few months of restorative practices. As I re-enter this work, I now think of it equally as "Practising Re-Mindfulness." As I have once again worked and re-worked through the philosophical and theoretical literature about writing, mindfulness, and aesthetic education, I am re-minded how the processes of becoming more wide-awake are intertwined with the processes of making art to document our lives. As I returned to samples of my writing and visual art pieces from more

than a decade of aesthetic experiences, I was offered a gentle, yet sometimes startling, gift of re-minding. I had documented through words and visual images what I was mindfully aware of at that moment. I can now re-mind myself of my questions, re-mind myself of my awakenings, and re-learn and re-contextualize my insights.

Contextualizing Practising Mindfulness Life Writing Pieces

"Revlon #47" and "Beacon Hill Back Street"

In April 2003, my husband was staying for almost a month as a visiting graduate student at Harvard University. I was on my term break from teaching, so I traveled from our home in Oxford, England to visit David and experience Boston. While Dave worked on his dissertation research, I had several days where I went by myself to explore a variety of places in and around Boston. One of the April days during my visit developed into an unseasonably hot day—it was as if spring suddenly vanished and we were immediately immersed in summer temperatures. Not only did that memorable April day have blissful weather, it also developed into one of my most "wide awake" and reverent days as a writer. Back at home, I was constantly trying to encourage my English students to get out, explore their city, bring a notebook, write their observations, write their feelings, write their memories, write their questions, write, write, and write some more. However, in my busy days as a teacher, I rarely heeded my own advice. Yet, here, in this city across the ocean from where I lived, on a day when I had no commitments to a classroom, marking, or meetings, I embraced the opportunity to play creatively. I bought a new spiral bound notebook and began to write poetry. I have never before, nor since been as prolific at poetry as I was that day. Poem after poem was scrawled on page after page as I walked my way through the downtown Boston area: observing from different places and using what I noticed to prompt my writing.

Whether the poetry that poured out of me onto the pages that day is of publishable—or even polished—quality does not matter to me. What mattered then, and what matters now, was that I was in process. I was at once a writer, yet still a teacher. I kept thinking about how I couldn't wait to tell "my kids" about my day as a poet when I got back to school. I looked forward to sharing some of my poetry with them so they could hear and see me as an active, practising writer. If I could be brave and share my writing (even in this scrawled and first-draft form), maybe they would risk being courageous and share theirs. I anticipated telling my students about how everything seemed a little sharper and clearer as I continued to walk, notice, and write. It was an inspiring cycle that I hoped they would experience in their lives: the more I paid close attention to the details of the faces and spaces around me, the more I wanted to write, and the more I wrote, the more mindfully I became "affectionately aware" (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p. 79) of the unfolding scenes and the beautiful human beings around me.

"Revlon #47" was written when I sat on a bench in Boston Common and noticed a small tube of lipstick that had fallen from someone's purse or pocket on the path just in front of me. Strangely, the same day I almost had lost a lipstick in the same park, but found it last minute when I got up to move to a new location. Maybe there is nothing strange about this experience at all. Maybe people lose lipsticks all the time. Yet it did seem strange to me: two times in the same day and in the same park I noticed a lost lipstick—one of my own and one from an unknown other. My personal experience of temporary loss likely made me more attuned to notice something so small, something I would normally overlook, something I would certainly not pick up, examine, and then write an ode of sorts about. I have included this poem in this section because I appreciate how this rather mundane and mindless act of losing a tube of lipstick in a park became a mindful connection to someone else's shared life story. This

awareness of my interconnection to others' lives continues in "Beacon Hill Back Street." At the end of a long day of observations and writing, I wandered through the well-known and stately neighbourhood of Beacon Hill. There I paused, watched, and became "The passing poet (sun-burnt and silent) / Scratching in purple pencil / Their unnoticed observations."

Photographed Collage Artifact and Studio Notes: "Filling the Silence"

The next offerings in this strand come from when I began my dissertation project and wanted to represent the ways in which silence had become a powerful part my anti-homophobia classroom experience. During the talking circle, many students chose to speak, share their opinions, and respond to or challenge others. However, many other students did not speak at any point during the talking circle. Many students stayed silent. It seemed easier in my dissertation to find ways to give voice to those who had spoken their opinions, yet I did not want to overlook or misrepresent those who had chosen, for whatever multiple reasons, to stay quiet. How could I represent the silent and the silence in a way that would value and respect their powerful presence in the teaching encounter?

At the time I was beginning to work on my dissertation, my daughter was taking an art class at a studio that opened with the purpose of connecting children to various moments and movements in art history through the processes of art making. The art teacher, who was also the studio owner, would introduce my daughter and her classmates to a "mentor text" piece of art from a particular time and place—whether it was Egyptian hieroglyphics or Warhol's soup cans—then would guide them through an art-process using a technique or borrowing from the feel or look of the piece to create their own masterpieces. I had the opportunity to get to know the owner of the studio during the time my daughter took classes and I deeply respected the

work she was doing with preschool children all the way to adults. I asked her if she might be willing to help me with some art making I wanted to do around silence for my dissertation.

"Filling the Silence" is a collaged pitcher that I created in my art-making session. I first offer three photographs of the artifact taken from different angles. The photographs represent the art(ifact) as a product. To represent the art(ifact) as a process, I share my "Studio Notes" which were written before beginning to make the product, immediately after the studio time, and then in the weeks and months that followed. I decided to journal about my experiences in the way a researcher engaging in ethnography would write field notes—I tried to capture observations, pay attention to the details of the process, and also describe my reactions and responses to the experience. When I returned to these notes during my recent work on this "Practising Mindfulness" strand, my first instinct was to treat the notes as a data source and then create a tidier, more polished essay about the experience. However, when I became immersed in the practice of re-mindfulness by re-reading my in-the-moment descriptions of I what I was thinking about and how I was feeling through the process of making art, I became convinced that the Studio Notes should be offered in their raw form. I have taken out some redundancies, represented the names of the studio owner and my daughter with initials, and made a few minor grammatical changes for clarity of expression, but other than that I have not re-written or changed the notes.

I continued to be awakened in my latest process of careful re-readings and minor revisions of my Studio Notes. I noticed how I had capitalized the word CONTROL in my notes. During the defense of my dissertation proposal just weeks prior to this art process, one of my committee members had spoken about how control seemed to be an obvious underlying theme to explore in my teaching and research. Therefore, I was hyperaware of control as a

concept and as an issue for me. Now that I am several years removed from the comment about control and its role in my research, it no longer seemed quite as important in a capital letter kind of way. I thought that it might be better stylistically if I simply changed the capitalized words back to lower cases for consistency with the rest of the document. After changing "CONTROL" to "control" several times, I suddenly stopped and realized what I was doing. Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) would have been pleased: I smiled. No need to be solemn, but I was certainly more awake to how I was still controlling the process. I was attempting to control control. How illuminating! So I returned back through the document and left CONTROL in capital letters—that idea and concept mattered to me at the moment and continues to matter to me now.

Gee's Tools of Discourse Analysis Comics: "Discourse" and "Conversation"

I have included two comics I created in a series where I explore James Paul Gee's (2011) ideas about "the tools" of discourse analysis. Shortly following my "Filling the Silence" process, I became more aware through conversations with a colleague, dips into literature, and participating in an academic conference that discourse analysis fit well within the scope of my work. In fact, I could see how, like many other language and literacy researchers, I was already engaging in a process of *critical* discourse analysis with the goal "not just to describe how language works or even to offer deep explanations, though they do want to do this. They also want to speak to and, perhaps, intervene in, social or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world. They want to apply their work to the world in some fashion" (Gee, 2011, p. 9). Gee outlines several tools of inquiry for those who would like to engage in discourse analysis. In an earlier imagined version of my dissertation, I was going to include one comic I had designed for each of the tools as an introduction or explanation of my analysis. I

have since moved in a different direction than that imagined dissertation, but I believe the two comics I include here provide a theoretical and analytical lens for viewing the next series of multi-media collages and reading their accompanying studio notes. The first comic focuses on Gee's conceptualization of small-d and capital-D Discourse. The second comic focuses on the idea of big-C Conversation. The big-C Conversation I began with these art processes continued as I used the mixed media collages as a prompt in conversations with my advisory committee and at a work-in-progress conference on discourse analysis. Yet, or as often happens in many social situations, these conversations were interrupted. I shifted to new conversations about cancer, but the art remains a tie to what was previously thought and talked about.

Bill 18 Mixed Media Collage Series: "Not So Silent Prairie Landscape," "Sticks and Stones," "Dear Manitoba," and "100% Chance of Rainbows"

As the artist/studio owner I worked with to develop the "Filling the Silence became busier with her business, it became increasingly difficult to find time to meet and make more visual art pieces. I decided to continue with some of the processes I had learned in the studio by myself at home. At this time I was becoming more aware of a big-C Conversation, which Gee (2011) describes as "debates in society or within different groups that large numbers of people recognize both in terms of what 'sides' there are to take in such debates and what sorts of people tend to be on each side" (p. 20), which was erupting around a proposed piece of provincial legislation. Bill 18 was being introduced as a legal means to address bullying in the provincial schools of Manitoba. It was becoming hotly debated in the public because the bill protected the rights for students and/or teachers to initiate and sustain Gay Straight Alliance clubs in K-12 schools. The media covered different community members' responses that were both for and against Bill 18. The first piece in this series called "Not So Silent Prairie

Landscape" explores the idea of how a serene and perhaps silent prairie landscape erupted into conversation about LGBTQ* rights in schools through the introduction of Bill 18. While the debate about Bill 18 continued, two disturbing stories about homophobia emerged in local media on the same day. One was about a Winnipeg man who woke up on Easter Sunday to the words "fag" and "homo" which had been spray-painted on his house. The other was about a gay couple in Morris, Manitoba who had decided to close their restaurant because of the homophobia directed towards them by community members. These two stories and then the media coverage that followed in the next few days became the material from which I produced three more visual mixed-media collage pieces: "Sticks and Stones," "Dear Manitoba," and "100% Chance of Rainbows." For this mindfulness strand, I include a photographed image and studio notes of each piece and the studio notes.

Food for Thought or Taking 10 cm of Mindfulness

The final piece in this strand illustrates my mindfulness practices during my cancer journey. This piece was written as an email to my sister, and my mother- and father-in-law. In the email, I write about a day less than a month after my surgery when I was recovering from my mastectomy and processing the news I had received the day before about the size of the tumor that had been removed. In this piece which I wrote as an opportunity to both think reflectively and reach out to those who loved and supported me, I think I capture a variety of mindfulness practices that are grounded in every day life: eating as meditation, cleaning as meditation, and writing as meditation.

Revlon #47

I must have slipped from her bag
While she sat on this bench.
Easily, not noticeable, dropped from her pocket, her bag.

Strangely, I did the same thing this morning (in this same park)
Only at the last minute did I realize
That the small silver cylinder of "Burnt Maple" had slid unceremoniously free.

Hers is black with three bands of gold.
Number 47 "Super Lustrous" from Revlon.
"Rose Wine."

I place it back on the ground near my feet
In case she comes back for it.
For how could I explain holding it in my hands, examining pigment, smelling fragrance?

She probably won't come back for it.
There are a million places she's been today
And a thousand chances to have lost it.

She will feel a twinge of annoyance.
Maybe even regret, possible a twitch of unjustifiable grief
When she realizes it is gone.

Maybe she has a rainbow palette of shades
And a stick of every texture.
Or maybe, like me, she has only the one tube that she rarely remembers to use.

But in one unceremonious moment
It is gone from her, unnoticed.
Its forgotten presence temporarily connect wearers/losers of colour.

Boston, April 2003

Beacon Hill Back Street

Brick sidewalks
Street lamps
Fire escapes that crawl motionless
three, four, five
flights.
Three dogs wait on leashes (they're not sure for what they wait).
Girl on ultra-marine scooter glides
Steep decline
Into her red (think over-ripened cherry rather than fire-engine) front door.
For a moment
Life is suspended and my life
Becomes entangled with theirs.
This, their home, their reality
Becomes my haven, my retreat, my canvass.
Because for one sunny, sticky, surreal April afternoon
My steps guide me on their paths
Until I sit
The figure on Myrtle and Grove
The passing poet (sun-burnt and silent)
Scratching in purple pencil
Their unnoticed observations.

Boston, April 2003

Figure 3: Filling Silence.

STUDIO NOTES: BEFORE ART-MAKING
December 4, 2012
Written in front of the "Art Studio" while waiting for my daughter while she makes art.

It seems entirely fitting that I start some dissertation writing right here in front of E.'s art studio. I will be coming here soon to begin working with her art teacher, S. on some visual images/pieces for my dissertation. I wrote an email to S. giving her a very short synopsis of how I got started on my dissertation project and asked about my specific art requirements. I want/need to make some images around silence. I gave some examples of pieces that I was thinking about—although maybe my suggestions were super obvious, famous images in art—Mona Lisa, Rodin's *The Thinker, The Scream.* S. called yesterday and we began to chat/make a plan. What at first seemed like a fairly straightforward request was much trickier than what it first appeared. For example, is the *Mona Lisa* silent or secretive? Are the images showing silence or isolation? Can a visual image have "voice"? Are all art/visual pieces silent? What do I mean by silence?

Silence is multi-faceted—sometimes silence is about CONTROL. Sometimes it is about power. It can be about power over, but it can also be power of or power for. There is the silent treatment, golden silence, silent night, silence please.

Silencing. Silence. Silenced. Silencer. Silences.

Silent

Silence

Silenced

Silencing

Silencer

Silences

Why was silence so important in the talking circle that signifies my crisis/transformative teaching moment? Why is silence and the silent important/powerful/meaningful in all teaching and learning encounters? What are my questions about silence (especially within the teaching context)?

- Is staying silent the same thing as not telling?
- What is "said" in silence?
- Is silence threatening?
- Can there be support in silence?
- Is silence a form of resistance?
- Why do teachers (not all, but many, myself included) fear silence?
- How do I try to control silence? Did my suggestion of images in this process show yet another way I am trying to control silence?
- Where are places that we encourage silence—both in schools and beyond?
- Is silence rewarded or punished in school contexts? When? How? For whom? Why?
- Is art a way of silence? Does art silence?
- How are visual images and silence connected?
- Do visual images have "voice"?
- What role does silence play in secrets?
- What role do secrets have in schools? Do we want teachers and students to have/keep secrets? What happens when secrets get told? What if they don't get told?
- How are the ideas of silence and "crisis" connected? Is silence part of the discomfort?

- I think of Krashen's (1982) theory of the "Silent Period" [or Input Hypothesis Theory] in second language acquisition. Input is needed before output is possible as a new language is learned. Is there a "silent period" in social justice learning? Are we silent as we acquire new language? Are we silent as we receive foreign/new input? When, where, and with whom do we feel safe enough to share our new input and then output it to someone else? How can a "silent period" be respected? How can we move beyond the silent period?
- Who CONTROLS silence? In classrooms? Visual art? Why? How?
- When is silence needed?
- Is there ever justification to be the silencer?
- Can silence be an empowering act of resistance or advocacy?

And, thus, in these very beginnings I am once again overwhelmed and off balance. This part of the process that I imagined to be so straightforward is anything but. The second-guessing begins before we even begin to know where and how to make images.

I see how much work I will need to put into these images—head work and heart work. S. suggested that in my first session we begin with collage work—maybe beginning with very literal representations of silence—mouths and lips perhaps. As we work through these images and layers, we might find ourselves more able to think about visual images in new ways. I love this strategy. It is far more organic. It seems far more about what I need to do. Yet what makes me laugh, or shake my head, or crinkle my nose, or something, is how this once again brings me back to one of my committee member's comments about CONTROL midway through my defense process. By making some suggestions to S. of art pieces that might serve as inspiration, I wanted to be actively participating in this process. Yet my suggestions were also about my attempt to *control* the process: "I will make three images about silence: a, b, and c. This will

represent 1, 2, and 3 about silence. They will be visually appealing and possibly a little ironic. I will think deeply as I make. I will then be able to bring new insights into teaching or my particular classroom experience. I will know how to make students able to make these connections for themselves." Neat. Tidy. Controlled. Check it off my list. Insert it into my dissertation.

But process, art, learning, reflection, reflexivity, life, love . . . doesn't work that way. I am a slow learner. And that's okay. But I'm going to have to learn how to give up lots of CONTROL in this process.

STUDIO NOTES
December 10, 2012
"Filling Silence" Collage Piece
Pre-Visit Writing

I am going to visit S. to make art today. I have been thinking a lot since I last wrote my studio notes. One image that keeps returning to me is the idea that many teachers (myself included) need to "fill the silence". Some students also need to "fill the silence"—we need to speak, tell, fill gaps with sound; not leave the ambiguities and discomfort of silence. I'm going to bring a transparent pitcher today. Perhaps if we are working on a process piece of a literal decoupage or collage piece, I could use the pitcher as my medium—filling the silence / pouring secrets. I may or may not use it, but it might be a good inspiration point. . . .

Studio Notes (Written in the DQ following my art-making)

I am buzzing with the wonderful experience of making art with S. I was also starving and decided I didn't really want to go home and make lunch. It would have somehow abruptly ended/shifted the experience. So I stopped at the DQ near our house—it is usually never packed here, even during a rush lunch hour. I could come, eat, and write. I chose a table with some beautiful light slanting in and casting shadows over my journal. It seems like a good idea

to remain in this space for a bit. At home there are too many pressing needs and impending distractions. Here I am free to focus.

I arrived at S.'s art studio at about 10:15. S. was cleaning up the space following a bachelorette party where everyone made a Jackson-Pollock-inspired piece. I helped her put away some canvasses and she began to pull out the decoupage/collage material. I brought out the pitcher to her and told her my conceptual idea. She thought it seemed to make a lot of sense so we began to flip through some images.

I have worked on collages before and included some as part of my candidacy exam, but as one of my advisory committee members had noticed and challenged me to think more about whether I had really produced a collage—I had carefully cut out my pieces and arranged them—there was some layering and some pieces were partially torn, but I was pretty deliberate, pretty CONTROLLED in the process. CONTROL keeps emerging throughout this process—it is definitely going to be something I am going to have to think, write, reflect upon more.

My first step today was to begin by looking through magazines for photos/words/images of literal silence. When we had spoken on the phone, S. had mentioned the idea of mouths, lips, etc. So this is where I began. I began with scissors. I carefully cut around mouths, but then I felt I couldn't leave out eyes—there was a sense that although the mouth was closed and not telling, the eyes were still open, still seeing, still taking it in. Perhaps this fits with my earlier insight about "the Silent Period"—input and output. A mouth can be closed, but eyes can tell a big part of the story.

I asked S. about decoupage versus collage—was it about the cutting versus tearing? She said there was certainly quite a bit about that. She then brought up the word CONTROL—the idea that torn edges left less set boundaries. Tearing was less controlled. She was sitting with

me working on a collage/decoupage project at the same time I was—engaging in the process alongside me—yet it only occurs to me now that I never asked her what she was making/why/theme. I'm not sure if she was thinking about silence in her piece or not. I should ask. I was absorbed in my own making. S. showed me a technique where she chooses an image and then tears it into many smaller pieces. I was surprised by how I felt as she did that. It was strange. I felt at first almost a betrayal to the original image. Hadn't I chosen it in its "completeness" because the whole image (even though I had cut a piece from a larger whole) was telling a story to and for me? How could I break it? Would it have meaning if fragmented and shredded? How could I be sure? If broken into smaller pieces, would I have CONTROL over the stories I was telling?

I began to voice some of the discomfort to S. "I know," she said. "It can be hard. You can keep them whole, but it is sometimes by tearing the pieces where you can begin to form completely new images."

And of course! It is this pulling apart, tearing, deconstructing, juxtaposing, introducing one narrative fragment into the next, the new, the possible. I am struck again by Davies's (2011) "experimental writing" and leaving the known behind. The grief, the fear, the betrayal that comes with leaving the known behind.

Perhaps this was part of my fear. Once an image is torn or cut, it can't come together in the same way again. Sure I could attempt to reconstruct it like a puzzle, carefully matching seams so the image is close to what was there before, but it won't be the same. This seems like a very interesting insight into experience and telling, writing and modalities, methodologies. I think some methodologies/writing have a sense that there will be an ability/possibility of keeping an experience whole—the story will speak for itself and will remain an intact image—

yet the moment the experience is reflected upon, studied, examined, manipulated in any way it changes. It becomes "torn apart"—yet I'm not sure I like those words here because they imply a destruction, but it is a change. Perhaps there is a belief that the pieces can be put together and the image/story/experience will be intact and unchanged. It can be re-pieced. Other methodologies/modes seem to be designed to show/embrace/explore how this is impossible. Why try to reconstruct the same image? Instead, how do we take the fragments/pieces/shreds/shards/strips to juxtapose, create, make new? How does this layering become a new story? How will this image become new because of where it is situated and what is next to it? Isn't that the process? Breaking up, tearing what is known to create new? Yet I experienced a bit of grief and a bit of "guilt"?—maybe that's not the right word—but maybe it is—tearing into and apart what is whole. It was complete. Now it needs to be broken to bring new life—pretty interesting religious image there—broken body of Christ to bring new life. Is that going too far?

Yet I began tearing and tearing apart. But at this stage, S. encouraged me to begin placing the images as well. She suggested that if I waited until the point where I had collected all the images I would be too focused on "fitting" them together. There would be too much deliberate placement rather than an emergent process. She suggested that by going back and forth between image placement and finding images there would be a more fluid process. I'd be less planned.

Before I begin a description/discovery of the gluing/placement process, I just want to back up a bit about my image search. First I was really looking at faces, but the magazine I was choosing from was some kind of posh architectural or home magazine—beautiful, sleek, modern homes. Lots of interiors and exteriors—set vignettes of home/books/gardens. Some of

the adverts or even homes in the features showed views of tranquil settings. Was that literal silence? Would a chair on a dock by the water be silent? There would be water lapping, birds chirping, maybe the hum of distant boats, perhaps voices floating down from the house or other cottages along the lake. Is quiet, calm, tranquil the same as silence? How does that connect with images of silence in the classroom?

Another time, I showed S. an image that was puzzling me. I was actually pointing to one part of a bigger image. In the photo, two people stood side-by side looking at images in an art museum. I was going to ask if one of the two portraits in the museum was "silent"—a woman reclined with her dog, apparently silent as she was being painted. Yet S. looked at the image as a whole—the space itself was about learned silence. The context implies a certain type of behaviour in order to be conventionally acceptable. Museums are often places of reverential silence. People look and talk intimately in hushed tones, but there is an expected quiet. We talked a bit about how classrooms are, but shouldn't be, like this. But I thought about how I set up the space in the first teaching of antihomophobia education to be this way: reverent, sacred, and hushed. I talked in quiet tones. I filled more gaps of silence that students usually filled, I moved students from participants to spectators—they were hushed and silenced in the process. I chose the image of the people looking in the museum, tore it out, tore it apart.

Another image I got very excited about was a weird configuration of two bodies—completely shrouded from head to toe in a blue stretch leotard thing—like used in performance art/Cirque du Soleil. The images showed one performer balanced on top of another. The top performer poured water from a container down to the other who was holding a funnel. The pitcher—filling silences; the pouring—pouring secrets; the funnel—funneling meaning. It all seemed brilliant. A fit for my medium (the pitcher). It was a huge image though. I'm not sure

we had our conversation about tearing bigger images into smaller pieces yet. Perhaps this is where some of my anxiety about breaking up an image came from—how could this broken picture where you couldn't see what the two performers were holding and doing—how could it tell this story that seemed so important to me at the time. When I currently think about this work-in-progress collage, my gut instinct is that some of the pieces of that particular image are too dominant on the pitcher—too dark, too big, too heavy, too imposing for the rest of the piece. I might need to try to scrape some of it out and break it down a bit.

STILL SO MUCH TO WRITE, YET I'VE SAT HERE A LONG TIME. SEEMS A GOOD TIME FOR MY HAND TO TAKE A BREAK.

Studio Notes Continued (Written at home after my drive home from DQ)

Process. Process. Process. I remind myself as I pull my "product" out of the bag at home. Is this what I expected it to look like? Will more of the glue disappear as it dries?

My mind is a bit everywhere right now. I have about an hour before I pick up the kids, but my mind feels very torn—perhaps like my collage. We leave tomorrow for Disney World. There is packing and cleaning, phoning and organizing to do, but I feel obligated to systematically and rigorously write these notes. These are my documents for later research.

So the back and forth process of placing images is what I feel I need to document now. I had a pack/stack of images and at S.'s suggestion, I began to use the glue to put them in/on my object. I asked if S. thought I should put the images on or in the pitcher. She said of course it was up to me, but there seemed something symbolic about filling the pitcher. Pragmatically this was easier as well because the textured bumps at the bottom of the pitcher are actually smooth and even on the inside. I like the idea of having to see through something in order to see the images of silence and the idea of transparency. What lens/barriers are between me and the

silence? What do we look through in order to see silence? How might this "looking through" distort our images?

So I began the process: brush or glue, place image, brush more glue. Add another image. Layer, add, brush. I looked at my first placements. "Uh oh," I said," I think I must have used way too much glue. I can't see the image." It was all a big, white, glue-y mess.

"No, no, you've done it right. It becomes clear as it dries. It becomes part of the process. I sometimes totally lose track of what I've placed where because I can't really see it. It becomes more of a mystery. It only become transparent once the glue dries and reveals what is underneath."

Wow. So powerful. I felt a shiver of recognition. All the symbolism. Yet this wasn't just symbolic, it was being experienced through the very tangible concreteness of working with an object and images and glue.

I worked carefully in one section, trying to cover it all up—layer and fill. S. and I talked more—about the sociability of the process of art-making—unexpected conversations aided by and through the process of working manually while the brain is highly engaged. S. suggested that I didn't need to work from just one spot on the object. She suggested more random placement of the images all around the object. We talked more. Soon it was time to pack up.

I had been so intently gazing on the areas I was working on that I hadn't noticed the images drying and appearing out of the white glue cloud. I hadn't noticed the gaps I was trying so hard to fill and cover were actually creating little spaces where light could come through. I commented on how I really liked some of the gaps.

"Let in the light," said S. with a smile.

She sent me home with supplies to finish and some extra plates so I could do the process with friends, have them share what silence means to them as we make art together.

I'll come to her with the "product" and my musings. She'll give the piece a varnish. We'll talk about next steps/new processes/projects.

As I was driving home from DQ, I thought about how glad I was I had brought in the pitcher. I like the symbol of filling the silence, that also it is an "empty vessel"—is this an image/symbol that fits my first teaching experience? Did I think that I was "filling" my students with anti-homophobia knowledge? I like that the object looks like clear, fragile glass, but it is really sturdy plastic. There is a perceived fragility, yet a pragmatic durability. I also wonder about the backs of the images, which I can see when I peer inside the pitcher. There are flip sides to the pages—not about silence—not chosen—yet now a part, a counter-story. Do I cover these? Or do I leave these to make their own random, unexpected, "other side" of the silence images?

Such an intriguing process. Enough for now. Time for many other processes of today to begin.

ART-MAKING FIELD/HOME STUDIO NOTES
January 23, 2013
Return to the "Filling Silences" Collage Piece

I'm trying not to underestimate the power of ten minutes. I need to be out the door picking up my kids in ten, but I've just finished another stage of my "Filling Silence" process. Point form notes:

- I had one section where the image seemed too dark and dominant (see previous entry), so I started by scraping holes in this image, trying to break it up a bit. Harder than I thought to break through the hardened, dried layers of glue to tear into the piece.

- I looked for new images and tried to decide how to tear them apart.
- I began the gluing process.
- Although I appreciated the spaces and gaps, I must say that once again I felt compelled to fill—there just seemed to be so many great images—I want to "use" the space. Is this what I do in classrooms?
- I picked out some bigger face images
- I left more space near the top
- I toyed with the idea of finding letters—writing "silence" on the handle of the pitcher or on the top layer of the pitcher.
- Difficult to know when to stop. When was I "done"?
- I still wonder, is this one draft?
- Does it "work" as process/product?

Must go. Goal tonight: type up these Studio Notes about this piece and email S.

Same evening after typing process notes

I am very grateful I wrote such detailed notes in my journal following the art making. This process of returning to my notes makes me feel better. I am moving forward with my research. I have been very tough on myself when people ask me how the research is going. I have said it is not going because of my focus on teaching, but that really isn't true. I think that art making (both the visual pieces and poetry writing) provide a good balance with teaching. A bit more on another day. For now, it is time for sleep.

STUDIO NOTES—ALREADY SECOND GUESSING?
January 24, 2013

I have a few moments here before teaching my class. I have just been volunteering at a school/residence for young women who are pregnant, or recently become mothers, but continuing with their education. After my work with a few of these student-mother writers, I always come back feeling inspired and eager to get to the page. Before feeling as if I have "completed" or come to the end of this cycle of analysis on the "Filling Silence" piece, I must first connect the art making with some reading and thinking that have occurred between my first time in the studio with S. and this latest return to the piece—both in making and writing about making.

One day not so long ago I was driving to the other university to teach and I began to think about why I had not returned to my collage piece. Why hadn't I made my next appointment in the studio with S.? This work is so different to my teaching and might make a nice balance. Why not return and "finish" the piece? Part of it can be answered by the everyday reality of time—life continues at a busy and unpredictable pace. And because of this, I can always find reasons to postpone the work—I need uninterrupted time, I have to finish marking first, I'm not sure what I'm doing with my classes, so I better figure that out first, someone is sick, I have to arrange violin lessons … yes, there is always that. I think I felt tempted for a while to try to remove all of that other stuff, the life stuff, from these "studio notes"—stay pure to the project, but I think when it comes to reflective and reflexive work, all of the messy, complicated, uncontrollable elements of surrounding life are very real variables and influence the possibilities for engaging in this kind of work. There are almost always more urgent, present challenges that seem to take precedent over the looking backward and looking inward work. So where is there time? Should there be time? How do I learn how to do this amidst the present and future demands? How do I learn to intentionally and mindfully find time for these

reflective and reflexive practices? Do I wait until I have stretches of time or do I clutch onto a few moments here and there and enter in and out of the process in a less sustained, but still intentional manner? Or is there a bit of both—some times that are longer and deeper, some moments that are "this is what I have today, let's see where I can go in this half hour."

So on my drive toward teaching, I focused on how time and busyness were factoring into my thinking and researching process. Obviously I must have convinced myself to do a little carpe diem and just take the time I found available to do what I could, with what I had, at the moment. And although I don't want to sound like this is a process where I can make a "to do" list, check things off, and be finished, there was a real sense of momentum that came from taking the time yesterday to return to the art making. I suddenly felt myself back engaged with the earlier thought process and committed to what I wanted to do in the process. I found myself returning to my journal notes. As I typed them here, I could see I had been working, thinking, making—I just hadn't really felt like there was any movement at all. It inspired me to email S., think about next steps, consider how and where and when I could return to the page and my notes and my thinking.

In my conversation with myself when I was driving, I also started thinking about the piece itself. I wasn't sure I was happy with the way it looked. Was it too densely covered in images? Was that one image far too dominant? Why had I chosen a few words and did those words still speak to me? Then I began thinking about "authoring." One of my teacher education students had written an essay about assessment—and in particular the assessment of journal writing. He was really disappointed by some of the bland writing he had received from what he thought were really promising, connecting, and intriguing journal prompts. His essay prompted me to think about how journal writing is really just the beginning. It is the places where the

ideas begin to bubble. Sometimes the writing sings and soars, but other times we need more time and space to think through the idea. Sometimes we need to write and then talk and then write some more. Why was I not thinking about my art piece like this? Did I really expect to do collage work on an artifact one time and get exactly what I was hoping for? Was it okay to show this first draft work? Or should I go out and find some more translucent plastic pitchers and try again? What would I learn through that process? Should a collection of these pitchers become the final piece? Or should some parts of my representation in this dissertation capture and offer first drafts? I like the idea of sharing representation/modes/artifacts at various stages of drafting, but it also feels vulnerable. It feels like a rather high-stakes forum to try this level of experimentation, yet if the whole thing is about experimentation, how can I do anything BUT offer the experiments?

I don't really know, but I wonder if this censors me at this very early stage of art making. If it isn't "Good Enough" should I bother? I thought I was through with this debate with myself, and I can almost hear my advisory committee groaning if they were to read this. My doubts and debates are not enough to shy away from the project, but they are enough to make me pause and reflect, which I guess is the whole point in all of this.


Discourse
GEE'S TOOLS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
ACCORDING TO JIM, little-d discourse REFERS TO LANGUAGE-IN-USE (LIKE STORIES, CONVERSATIONS, OR A COMIC PANEL).
GEE, p. 84
LET'S NOT CONFUSE THIS WITH CAPITAL D DISCOURSE...
... WHICH IS A "CHARACTERISTIC WAY OF SAYING, DOING, AND BEING" (GEE, 2011, p. 30)
THE KEY TO DISCOURSES IS "RECOGNITION" (GEE, p. 35)
"IF YOU PUT LANGUAGE, ACTION, INTERACTION, VALUES, BELIEFS, SYMBOLS, OBJECTS, TOOLS, AND PLACES TOGETHER IN SUCH A WAY AS THAT OTHERS RECOGNIZE YOU AS A PARTICULAR WHO (IDENTITY) ENGAGED IN A PARTICULAR WHAT (ACTIVITY), HERE AND NOW, THEN YOU HAVE PULLED OFF A DISCOURSE." (GEE, 2011, p. 35).
TOOLS
OBJECTS
INTERACTION
SYMBOLS
BELIEFS
LANGUAGE
ACTION
VALUES
PLACES
HEY, I KNOW THAT GUY!
YEAH, HE'S ONE OF US!
MAN, HE NAILED THAT DISCOURSE!
I WONDER IF I SHOULD GET A HAT LIKE THAT.


PEOPLE ENGAGE IN RECOGNITION WORK WHEN WE TRY TO MAKE VISIBLE TO OTHERS (AND TO OURSELVES) WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE ARE DOING...
I AM A TEACHER TEACHING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS.
HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS
... THIS WORK IS ALSO ENGAGED WHEN WE TRY TO RECOGNIZE OTHERS FOR WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY ARE DOING...
OKAY... I GUESS MY PROF THINKS I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HOMOPHOBIA BEFORE I TEACH HIGH SCHOOL.
...IT HAPPENS WITHIN INTERACTIONS FROM MOMENT TO MOMENT...
I'M HELPING DEVELOP AN ANTI-HOMOPHOBIA COACHING GUIDE AT MY PRACTICUM SCHOOL. WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IT?
... IT HAPPENS DURING REFLECTION ABOUT THOSE INTERACTIONS LATER...
... AND IT HAPPENS WHEN WE TRY TO UNDERSTAND HUMAN INTERACTIONS AS RESEARCHERS, PRACTITIONERS, THEORETICIANS, OR INTERVENTIONISTS OF SOME SORT. (GEE, 2011, p.37)
THE FACT THAT PEOPLE HAVE DIFFERENT ACCESS TO DIFFERENT IDENTITIES, PRACTICES, STATUS & SOCIAL GOODS IS A ROOT OF INEQUALITY IN SOCIETY...
H
FAST TRACK FOR SILVER SPOON HOLDERS
ROAD CLOSED FOR THOSE WITHOUT SILVER SPOONS
DETOUR BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM
... INTERVENTIONS IN SUCH MATTERS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIAL JUSTICE...
H
FAST TRACK FOR SILVER SPOON HOLDERS
WELCOME
DETOUR
GET YOUR MAPS HERE!
SINCE DIFFERENT IDENTITIES AND ACTIVITIES ARE ENACTED IN AND THROUGH LANGUAGE, THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE IS INTEGRALLY CONNECTED TO MATTERS OF EQUITY AND JUSTICE.
(GEE, 2011, p.30)
TODAY'S INQUIRY:
THE LANGUAGE OF GENDER & SEXUALITY DIVERSITY & EQUITY


Conversations
GEE'S TOOLS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
AS WE LEARNED IN THE LAST "TOOLS" COMIC, GEE LOVES HIS little AND CAPITAL LETTER DISTINCTIONS, SO...
CAPITAL-C CONVERSATIONS ARE "DEBATES IN SOCIETY OR WITHIN DIFFERENT GROUPS...
d
D
RIGHT TO LIGHT
...THAT LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE RECOGNIZE BOTH IN TERMS OF WHAT 'SIDES' THERE ARE TO TAKE IN SUCH DEBATES...
PRO CHOICE
PRO LIFE
C
RIGHT TO SAME SEX MARRIAGE
1 + 1 PROTECT FAMILIES MARRIAGE


... AND WHAT SORTS OF PEOPLE TEND TO BE ON EACH SIDE." (GEE, 2011, p.20)
"THE THEMES AND VALUES THAT ENTER INTO CONVERSATIONS CIRCULATE IN A MULTITUDE OF TEXTS AND MEDIA." (GEE, 2011, p.56)
FREE PRESS
BILL 18
HOLY BIBLE
it gets better
"OF COURSE, PEOPLE TODAY OFTEN KNOW THESE THEMES AND VALUES WITHOUT KNOWING THE HISTORICAL EVENTS THAT HELPED CREATE OR SUSTAIN THEM IN THE PAST AND PASS THEM ON TODAY." (GEE, 2011, p.56)
(TIMELINE INFO FROM: http://cupe.on.ca/a3763/LGBT TIMELINE CANADA LII.pdf)
1965
EVERETT KILPPERT ARRESTED AS "DANGEROUS SEX OFFENDER" FOR HIS HOMOSEXUALITY.
C-150
THERE'S NO PLACE FOR THE STATE IN THE BEDROOMS OF THE NATION.
1967
1977
QUEBEC HUMAN RIGHTS ACT
FIRST PROVINCE TO INCLUDE SEXUAL ORIENTATION.
FEB. 6, 1981
GAY RIGHTS NOW!
CANADA'S "STONEWALL": TORONTO'S GAY BATH HOUSE RAID RIOTS
2003
BILL C-250
SEXUAL ORIENTATION 1 OF 4 PROTECTED CLASSES IN HATE PROPAGANDA LEGISLATION
2005
BILL C-38
SAME SEX MARRIAGE AVAILABLE ACROSS CANADA
TODAY
Lynne & Sara invite you.... Sat. June 3
"IT'S IMPORTANT AND INTERESTING TO UNCOVER THE HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF TODAY'S CONVERSATIONS." (GEE, 2011, p.57)
DICTIONARY
... BECAUSE PEOPLE INTERPRET OUR LANGUAGE, AND WE INTERPRET THEIRS THROUGH OUR KNOWLEDGE OF SUCH CONVERSATIONS." (GEE, 2011, p.29)
fag·got: 1. bundle of sticks bound together as fuel. ORIGIN: MIDDLE ENGLISH
2. derogatory term for male homosexual. ORIGIN: AMERICAN, 1900-1915 PERHAPS FROM OTHER BRITISH MEANING
3. unpleasant, contemptuous woman. ORIGIN: CIRCA 1590, BRITAIN

Figure 4. Bill 18 Multimodal Collage Series.

Figure 5. Not So Silent Prairie Landscape.

Studio Notes
March 24, 2013 ***Not So Silent Prairie Landscape***

Another art making process to consider and document in these studio notes. I appreciated coming back to the notes I wrote in the moments following my first studio experience, so I will attempt to do the same here and now. The only problem is that I made my art later in the day today and then needed to enter into supper and bedtime routines. It is now 8:19 pm—not late by any standards, but I've had a persistent cold for over a month. Last night I had to sleep in a chair to try to control the coughing, so tonight I am pretty exhausted.

I have a different feeling tonight after making art. I'm less "buzzed" than my first art-making process. Tonight I'm filled with many thoughts and questions, but I'm much quieter and more calmly contemplative. Lots of factors play into this, not just the health/sleep concerns mentioned above. My art making was not in the studio, but rather on my dining room table, which I covered in an array of flyers. I was not under S.'s guidance. I have been on the look out for some projects/ides I can do by myself that might fit the silence theme. I've been thinking for a while about the famous art pieces I originally considered, but somehow juxtaposing, changing, playing with their landscapes, costumes, contexts, etc. to make them part of the prairies. I also thought a lot about prairie landscapes: flat, golden, wheat-filled prairie landscapes. I knew I wanted to integrate real stalks of dried wheat/grains into a landscape painting. However, I have also been thinking about some of the headlines I had been reading about Bill 18, a bill meant to formally and legally address bullying in the province of Manitoba. In this quiet, serene, prairie landscape, we are beginning to break out of the silences and speak out about bullying and GSAs. Perhaps I could collage some of these headlines among big sky and real wheat. I wondered if the sky should be big, blue, and representative of quiet and peace or a big sky filled with looming dark clouds of an impending storm.

Too tired. Eyes keep drooping. Pen stopping. I am going to shut off lights and try to sleep. More in the morning. Hopefully tonight I can sleep all night in my bed.

April 1, 2013 ***Not So Silent Prairie Landscape***

Another week has passed—filled with March Break, a trip across to Moose Jaw and back, Easter, etc. It is now a cold, bright, crisp Monday morning, the kids are back to school. I have so many directions in which I want to head this week in terms of my work, but I first want to re-enter the art-making process.

After I set up the kids with some art projects of their own, I took out one of the canvases I had purchased at a local craft store. I decided to paint the entire canvas in varying mixed hues of blue to represent the prairie skies. I mixed several shades or acrylic craft paint to do so. Pleased with my canvas of blue, I turned to my packages of wheat and grains. I decided on an approximate size I wanted and cut many stalks to about the same size. I had printed about five or six newspaper articles about Bill 18 on plain white letter-sized sheets of paper. I realized if I cut these into small strips or sections and then hover them as clouds above my wheat fields. I wanted headlines, sections for the Bill itself, and a few opposing opinions, including a sign from an opposing Christian school, and a supportive sign from a United Church.

Once the cutting was completed, I used a lot of glue gun glue to create the field of wheat. I decided once I had the peaceful blue sky and golden wheat I should digitally photograph the canvas—showing a representation of the "silence" that might be idealized in the rural, pastoral landscape of the prairies. Then I began the collage process of gluing the headlines onto the sky. Just as I experienced with the picture, the glue only dried to transparency, so at first there was a cloudy whiteness. I had to wait in order to have the whole picture reveal itself.

The placing of these articles, headlines, and policy pieces in this prairie landscape really made me stop to think about how what had previously been a hushed or silenced topic (spoken about, preached about, whispered about, joked about). There had been an eruption of talk into the landscape through a policy decision. Why now? Why has there been such a shift in the Discourse (Gee, 2011) about LGBTQ* rights more globally in the past three years or so?

Figure 6. Sticks and Stones.

April 25, 2013 ***Sticks and Stones: April 2, 2013***

The stories and media coverage about Bill 18 has continued to proliferate. Two very dramatic, visible, and disturbing incidents of homophobia were reported in the April 2, 2013 *Winnipeg Free Press*. One story, *"*Anti-gay slurs on home seen as a targeted attack," was about

a man who woke up on Easter Sunday to notice the words "FAG" and "HOMO" had been spray-painted on the exterior of his Winnipeg home. The other story, "Gay owners to close restaurant, sick of insults," was from Morris, Manitoba. This small town had been in the news in the past few months because the editor of the *Morris Mirror,* the local newspaper, wrote a racist editorial about the *Idle No More* movement and Aboriginal people. In this same town, two restaurant owners announced that they were going to close their restaurant by April 13th because they were frustrated, disturbed, and saddened by homophobic comments by several people in the town. I searched the *Winnipeg Free Press* website to gather multiple articles and photocopied each one. I focused first on the two awful coinciding stories of homophobia: one rural, one urban. There were many reactions to these articles, but I found the online comment threads very difficult to read. Perhaps there is more to do with these, but for now, I just left them. I found a "Letter of the Day" from the April 3rd editorial section that uses an anti-oppressive Discourse. In this letter, author David Jacks calls Manitobans to make connections between the "deep, systemic, recurring, and violent" forms of hatred occurring in the province. There were also several follow-up articles about how members from the local Morris community, the Manitoba LGBTQ* community, and the premier offered support and took action by visiting to the Pots 'N Hands restaurant—this is a Discourse of activism, solidarity, and the need for dignity and respect.

On the evening of the 22nd, I planned to begin one more canvas, but I had a strong sense of artistic momentum and did two. In the first canvas I wanted to show anger, burning, fire. I though of the burning of crosses by the Klu Klux Klan, the burning of witches, or the burning in the Holocaust—this long historical way of trying to destroy, shame, burn, and run out whomsoever is deemed a threat to the normative and privileged. I mixed red and two shades of

orange acrylic craft paint and used large, non-uniformed, sweeping brush strokes. I wanted the sense of movement, the sweeping, dancing flames, a sense of the out-of-control. This red and orange canvas would contrast and juxtapose the serene blues in the previous landscape. I wanted the headlines—complete with the *Winnipeg Free Press* banner and the dateline to be top and centre. Both articles included fairly large photographs of buildings to represent the story. In the one there is a small white house with the spray painted words "FAG" X 2 and "HOMO." The other photograph shows a small restaurant on a quiet, small, prairie town street. When I used the Modge-Podge collage glue, I added a slight orange tint of paint. I wanted the glue to hold down the images and headlines, but I wanted a "wash" of the flames and colours of passion to blend these images into the background.

Next, I cut the two articles into key phrases of either explanation of the story or strong emotional reactions. These were mainly a line or two in length and I kept them all in the same size. As I looked at my piles, I though about how the collaged words on my first canvas had taken on a look of clouds in an otherwise blue prairie sky. These small cut up phrases looked like little sticks. Aha! The "fuel" of the fire. The sticks of the campfire. I thought about the phrase or expression, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." Here in front of me were two articles about how names CAN and DO hurt and destroy. I wondered if I should keep the "sticks" or phrases separated below each of their respective headlines/photos—one could read the canvas like newspaper columns to get the separate stories. Yet, I realized that both stories were part of the same Conversation (Gee, 2011). By mixing each, the rural/urban split gets purposefully messy. These stories become intentionally entwined. The stories can be read as one narrative where boundaries are blurred.

As I walked to the university the next day, I thought more about the dimensionality of the canvases I had just made. I loved how the real wheat and grains from the first visual text gave depth and texture to the piece. I decided I wanted to add real sticks and stones to my canvas. The streets right now are very messy because of spring melting, so on my walk home I stopped and gathered a handful of small twigs of various shapes and textures. Then from my battered driveway that needs repairing, I gathered a bunch of small stones. That afternoon before picking up the kids from school, I glue-gunned the twigs and sticks among the collaged "stick" phrases.

Figure 7. Dear Manitoba.

***Dear Manitoba* Studio Notes**

I was inspired by the words of David Jacks who wrote a letter to the newspaper on April 3, 2013 directly responding to the two articles about homophobia from the previous day. He writes about how although the recent incidents took place in different locations, there is a need to make connections, and also a need to take action and "make Manitoba an unwelcoming place for homophobia, sexism, and all forms of discrimination."

I kept thinking about places and the province. Connections often become visible on maps—road and rivers cross and connect much of the province. I decided a collage of a variety of map images would make a good backdrop for the canvas. I Google searched Manitoba maps and a variety of different maps were available—mostly in colour. I only have a black and white printer, so all the maps came out in various shades of grey. I decided to use oil pastels to bring colour to some parts of the images. In another, I used the pastels to "colour" the whole province purple. In another smaller province image, I used reds and oranges, in another I used shades of green. In another I used a light blue to colour lakes and a dark blue to trace rivers. In one, I left Manitoba white/grey, but made MB red, SK green, and AB blue. I cut, layered, and arranged the map pieces to make a collaged map background.

Inspired by what I had been reading by Gee (2011) in *Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. I was thinking about the "informational saliency" (p. 130) of certain "intonation units" (p. 132) in the letter. I intuitively felt certain words and phrases had more weight and importance. I used almost all the text in the letter (minus a few phrases in the first paragraph), but then I used the enlarging feature on the photocopier to make phrases different sizes for emphasis. In some ways, the choice to make different sizes of font was a choice of visual design and aesthetics. But on the other hand, the size changes acted as a visual highlight of certain phrases I believe

are more salient than others. I arranged the text into paragraphs, but before gluing, I decided I wanted more of a letter feel to the piece. David Jacks was writing to the editor, but I felt he was really addressing the whole province. I found creamy antique-white stationery and using my "best" handwriting, I penned a "Dear Manitoba" heading. I also chose to keep a "Winnipeg Free Press/Letter of the Day/Headline/Date" from the printed article as part of the canvas. I closed with the name of the author, just as it appears in the newspaper. The grey background is lighter than the previous two canvases. In some ways, the Discourse is also different. The Discourse in this letter seems to be critical, as it looks as the systemic aspects of homophobia. Yet, the words and ideas in this letter seems to be like a plant growing towards the light—it is seeking a better way of living and being with one another.

Just like "Sticks and Stones," I originally left this two-dimensional. Yet during the same walk where I decided to add sticks and stones to the previous piece, I decided I needed dimensionality to all of the pieces. I thought of how this letter seemed to be planting seeds for change. But pragmatically, the only "seeds" I had in my house were popcorn kernels. I quickly decided I really liked this metaphor. Popcorn seeds—seeds of corn—when put under enough heat experience a complete and irreversible transformation. Something hard and closed can pop into something light and nutritious. I began gluing the seeds just to the bottom of the picture, to match the design of the other two canvases. But as I did, I thought about how it is my subjectivity and experiences that allows me to see this letter as filled with hope and possibility for transformation. I see the seeds within the words. I chose to work with this letter instead of countless other comments and letters about how homosexuality is against the laws of God and nature. I chose to highlight, construct from, and celebrate the critical, yet hopeful letter from

David Jacks. I thought about how this illustrates the "framing problem" discussed by Gee (2011):

> The frame problem is both a problem and a tool. It is a problem because our discourse analytical interpretations (just like people's everyday interpretations of language) are always vulnerable to changing as we widen the context within which we interpret a piece of language. It is a tool because we can use it—widening the context—to see what information and values are being unsaid or effaced in a piece of language (p. 68).

Perhaps if I continued the seeds all around the canvas, I would draw attention to my deliberate framing of this piece.

Figure 8. 100% Chance of Rainbows.

***100% Chance of Rainbows* Studio Notes**

The final piece I made yesterday afternoon/evening. I knew that I wanted to link together several articles about the response to and support of the Morris restaurant owners. I found the language and imagery used in the articles startling—lots of discussion of rainbows in Morris to symbolize the deliberate arrival of the LGBTQ* community in support, advocacy, and protest. So rainbows—what to do with that? At first I thought of painting a prairie landscape with a big dark sky and a rainbow. Yet I wanted the dimensionality of the other pieces. I played around in my head with the idea of using petals or leaves, but I didn't know whether I should go with live (if that would even work if they hadn't been pressed and dried) or with fabric. I then thought about how fragmented these stories become as I cut out pieces. While spring cleaning, I recently re-discovered mosaic glass that I had used to make a stepping stone for my garden a few years ago. The mosaic glass seemed a fitting medium to work with shards and fragments of language, Discourse, and Conversations. I located the plastic bag of glass and began sorting the small shards into colour groups. I chose a dark background—swooping black paint with thick white and lots of silver. I wanted to add sparkle to the darkness. The big textured brushstrokes were designed to evoke movement, winds of change, storminess, a fast-moving system. I placed the glass mosaic tiles of the first colour and then inserted the words. I imagined a reader reading from left to right—each group of phrases a "sentence," but the colour band itself representing a narrative strand. I imagined the reader reading the colours from purple to red, following the left to right convention of print on a page. I also tried to arrange each colour strand as an increasing hope-filled Discourse. However, readers may approach "reading" the image and phrases in a very different way and that would also be okay—it would just make for a different path of constructing meaning.

Food for Thought or Taking 10 cm of Mindfulness

From: **Jennifer Watt** (me@email.com)
Sent: October-22-13 2:58:07 PM
To: My sister; mother-in-law; and father-in-law

Dear all,

You have been very close in my thoughts this afternoon, so instead of writing in my journal, I thought I'd send my musings in an email to you (then print it and paste it in my journal, since this process of reflective writing holds a place in my recollection).

I could begin today's story in so many different places (isn't that true of so many stories). I will choose to begin this one when I was preparing my lunch. I had a very peaceful morning—I walked through falling snowflakes, I bathed for the first time since surgery (don't worry, I've been showering), I napped—allowing the warmth of the bath to carry me into a relaxing half hour of sleep. The morning drifted away in various rituals of self-care.

It was now lunchtime. When I have worked at home or when I have been teaching, lunch has not always been my priority. I grab something quickly or sometimes I forget to eat altogether. It is then time to pick up the children from school and I am starving and cranky. Yet, when I made my care plan to share with the friends and neighbours who have become my support team, I knew I should name this bad habit and ask for help. If people were making a batch of soup or stew, I asked them to consider making an individual portion that I could freeze and then have on hand for this meal I so often neglect. When mom was here after my surgery she made three different kinds of soup and packed individual portions into the freezer.

On the weekend, E. had a friend over to play and her mom sent three more beautiful portions of soup—two went into the freezer and one went into the fridge. Today, I knew I had the second half of the most delightful soup—I don't even know all that is in it—squash, sweet potato, something green, curry—but it tastes of comfort, warmth, and something a little exotic. It tastes grown up, gourmet, deeply satisfying. I didn't have as much today because I had a more generous portion yesterday. I asked myself, "What does my body want and need to go with this soup?" I looked at the apples in the bowl and took one out. I always like apples better when I cut them—somehow the slices taste better than when I bite right into the whole fruit. I thought to myself, I could probably use a protein so my lunch would last longer and I wouldn't grab for something less nutritious mid-afternoon. I melted cheese on half a bun. The oozy cheese dripped on my plate and I took one of my apple slices and dipped it into the melted cheese. Delight.

I sat eating my nutritious and satisfying lunch at the dining room table (I need a chair with an arm rest because of the surgery). I wanted "company" for lunch, so I decided as I ate I would read through the next section of the *Healing Journey* (www.healingjourney.ca) I was working on. I began to eat and read. I reached a section on nutrition—on the variety of advice and the conflicting ideas, but the concept that really spoke to me and seemed alive to me on the table,

the idea I was both literally and figuratively consuming, was that the idea that eating well, or eating for taste, enjoyment and health, is an empowering action that has a strong healing effect on the mind and body. Yes, I felt more empowered sitting and eating this beautiful food. Yes, I felt grateful that today, at this moment, my body likes the taste of all these foods and I feel well enough to make, eat, and clean up this food. I continued to eat and read. I came to a section about external stressors and how stress is not so much about external factors, but rather our own internal responses to the stimuli. I know I have read this before. I know it has made sense to me before. But today it seemed to hit me with renewed meaning.

Yesterday my surgeon called with the pathology report. Mostly "good" news (although I am mindful here of the Zen parable of good luck/bad luck with the young man who falls from his horse). There are only microscopic cancer cells in the lymph nodes, they feel they got clear margins, and the surgeon is confident there is no need for further surgery or taking auxiliary nodes at this time. The cancer is estrogen/progesterone connected (but I knew that was very, very likely because of the kind of cancer I have.) And then the news that shook me a little, but also seemed to fit with the intuition I felt and spoke following my very first ultrasound—the cancer was 10 cm. Again, because of the kind of lobular cancer I have, the size is often very big by the time of discovery. I tried not to spiral into "big means bad" or "this is doom," but I will admit that is was a bit scary. I knew it would likely be over 5 cm, but I guess a part of me was hoping that it would be single digits. And, I don't even really know why that was my hope. The surgeon told me that because of the minimal node involvement, she would probably place me somewhere between Stage 2 and Stage 3. I was sure I was going to hear Stage 3, so in some ways this was a more gentle diagnosis.

So, there was this news. There was this new bit of information to try to make sense of and to live alongside. I talked to my husband. I talked to my sister. I took my son to his piano lesson and delighted in his delight and his response to his gentle and loving music teacher. I helped my son and daughter get ready for bed and lay beside them and read them stories. I watched a movie—British and set in the 1920s and filled with beautiful hair and costumes. I went to bed and slept well.

Ten centimeters is an external piece of information. How I choose to label what this means, how I choose to understand or talk about this 10 cm to others and, more importantly, to myself is what becomes important. I had a tumour growing inside my body that grew to a size of 10 cm. Thanks to a wonderful, fast, and responsive health care system, those 10 dangerous centimeters are no longer in my body. Thanks to honest, caring, and wonderful advice, I chose surgery that was the least invasive to my body and offered me the strongest opportunity to heal.

In many ways, I feel better than I have in months and months. I have taken more than a month off the other external stress factors in my life. I love thinking, reading, and writing in my dissertation journey, but as I got closer to the "end" of my degree, I attached more and more weight and future possibilities to the things I loved about my work. I have done little "work" on my dissertation since my diagnosis. Now I have official leave from my studies for 12 months. I can work on it if I choose to and it makes me feel good and reminds me of who I am beyond cancer, but I don't have to work on it if I don't feel like it.

I can take the time to prepare a delicious lunch and fill my mind, body, and spirit with the nutrients I need to heal. I can take time in the hour following lunch to slowly and mindfully tidy and clean my kitchen. I can connect how a clean space brings me a sense of calm, pride, clarity. I can reflect on how I've always been an energetic "do-er" and how sometimes the very still ways of meditation are too challenging for me (not that I shouldn't keep working on the practice of stillness), but that I also need to acknowledge the authentic self inside me that finds meditation within everyday movement and activities. I thought about Barbara Brown Taylor's (2009) book *An Alter in the World* and how she writes that washing dishes and preparing food can be a prayer, a meditation, an act of reflection and love if we are mindful of how it is that.

I took time to take flowers that were no longer at their best out of two bouquets people had lovingly sent to me. The showy, bright, colourful flowers have now faded. Now in my two beautiful vases, I have mostly greenery and some subtle colours of the longest lasting flowers. I thought of how beautiful these bouquets continue to be. I noticed that now the most eye-catching flowers had died away, I was left with the structure of the design that I maybe had not noticed as clearly before. I connected this with the identity work I am doing daily with my changing body. I have "lost" one showy feature, but losing it meant that those 10 cm of misbehaving cells could leave my body. I miss the showy breast, but now I notice the beauty of the chest below. I can see the bravery and beauty of the healing incision. The breast that is left becomes all the more beautiful. I will likely lose my hair in the next few months, maybe my skin will temporarily lose its glow, perhaps I will have fewer or no eyebrows or eyelashes. But what will be left in the bouquet? What greenery and long-lasting stems and blooms will suddenly pop? What features will endure, stand-out, become my new beauty? Will I notice the way I have a golden circle around my eyes—the feature Dave has always called my "sunflower eyes"? Will my smile become more pronounced? Will I fall in love with my collarbones or my tiny feet?

In the middle of my reverie, the nurse phoned. I have more tests to come in the next few weeks to discover what is going on elsewhere in my body—CT scans, bone scans, a MUGA (whatever that is—something to look up later). We talked a bit more about timing of these tests and what I can expect following them. I sipped my tea as I listened. I was in such a peaceful and positive state of mind that I found the questions I wanted and needed to ask were easy to articulate. I was able to thank the nurse and my surgeon for their wonderful advice about my surgery options—especially around deciding against reconstruction. I was able to share how well I am feeling and grateful I am for their support. The nurse said it was a really refreshing change to talk to someone thinking so rationally and positively about the cancer journey.

I continued to wipe down my counters and doorknobs, knowing that I am trying my very best to keep our home as germ free as possible so I can remain healthy and ready for my next stage of treatments. I stretched my arms and shoulders. I felt empowered to be doing the everyday, but I was mindful I wanted to sit in my wonderful brown reclining chair to write about some of these feelings and thoughts about food, re-labeling stressors, and about the 10 cm that I want to come to peace with. Another friend phoned. She was home, making a shepherd's pie, there was enough for two, could she bring one over to me so that I could bake it when I want it? She can come at 4 pm. I said thank you. I felt more peace. I could imagine the warm shepherd's pie coming from the oven and paired with the spinach salad Dave and I had already planned for

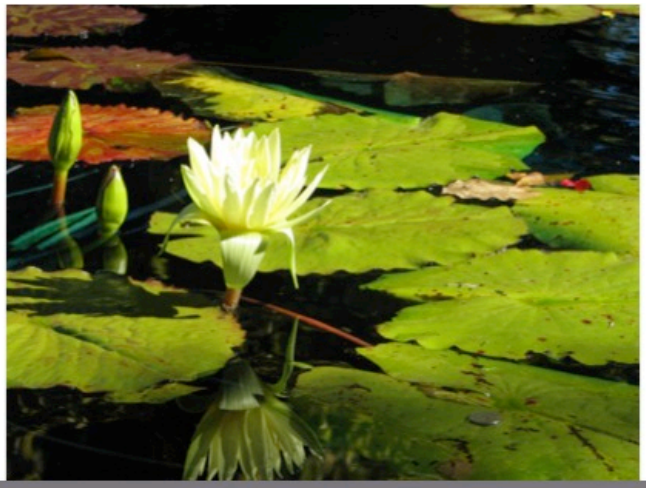
dinner. It will ready in time for me to take my daughter to violin and pick up my son from dance. I feel ready and rested to focus on these precious, life-affirming hours with the people I love most.

So I sit now, in the brown chair, under a fuzzy blanket, and I write to people I love. And I feel this profound and genuine sense of gratitude. I know that not every day will be quite as mindfully devoted to healing on all levels as today has been. Yet, I am so thankful that I have the privilege and power to clear my year (or more if needed) to live well. This has become a ridiculously long email, but it helps me sort my head and heart while at the same time connecting with people who have long championed this kind of reflective, mindful, and empowering way of living.

I love you all so much. I hope you have found some peace in your days as well.

Jen

CHAPTER FIVE
Practising Compassion



Practising Compassion

One compassionate word, action, or thought can reduce another person's suffering and bring him joy. One word can give comfort and confidence, destroy doubt, help someone avoid a mistake, reconcile a conflict, or open the door to liberation. One action can save a person's life or help him take advantage of a rare opportunity. One thought can do the same, because thoughts always lead to words and actions. With compassion in our heart, every thought, word, and deed can bring about a miracle. (Nhat Hanh, 2007, p. 7)

The genuine heart of sadness can teach us great compassion. It can humble us when we're arrogant and soften us when we are unkind. It awakens us when we prefer to sleep and pierces through our indifference. This continual ache of the heart broken open is a blessing that when accepted fully can be shared with all. (Chodron, 2003, p. 117)

To claim the truths about who we are, where we come from, what we believe, and the very imperfect nature of our lives, we have to be willing to give ourselves a break and appreciate the beauty of our cracks or imperfections. To be kinder and gentler with ourselves and each other. To talk to ourselves the same way we'd talk to someone we care about. (Brown, 2012, p. 131)

Compassion can be both the foundation and the organizing principle of our moral house, bringing clarity to our ethical vision. It will help us decide between competing values, and provide us with a simple criterion to determine the bottom line when we are confronted with our ethical challenge. With compassion as our fundamental value, we will be motivated by concern for others' welfare, our actions guided by the intention to help others, and the sight of others' happiness will bring joy. (Jinpa, 2015, pp. 194-195)

As more and more of us take to the page, as we explore and express our honest vulnerabilities, first to ourselves and perhaps later for publication, we are rendering ourselves more transparent, more open to the human condition in ourselves and others. We are rendering ourselves compassionate and in that compassion we discover that what we have begun to say, writing, is only the beginning of righting things. (Cameron, 1998, p. 146)

Together With Suffering

Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) reminds us that the word *compassion* "is composed of *com* ("together with") and *passion* ("to suffer")" (p. 6). Practising compassion means we actively practise how to be together with suffering—our own suffering and the suffering of others. Jinpa (2015) elaborates that "broadly defined, compassion is *a sense of concern that arises when we are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to see that suffering relieved"* (p. xx, italics in the original). Compassion begins with empathy, but moves beyond, calling for an active response of kindness, understanding, generosity, and care (Jinpa, 2015, p. xxi). Jinpa argues:

> Compassion is fundamental to our basic nature as human beings. Connecting with our compassionate part, nurturing it, and relating it to ourselves, others and the world around us from this place is the key to our happiness as individuals and our societal well-being. Each of us can take steps to make compassion a central reality of our own lives and our shared world. (p. xxviii)

Since compassion is fundamental to our basic human nature; since connecting, nurturing and relating compassion to ourselves, others and the world is key to our own and our society's happiness and wellbeing, it seems important to ask: what are the steps educators can take to make compassion a central reality of what we do in teaching and learning? What do current and future teachers need to know about compassion and how do they begin to practise compassion with themselves, their students, their colleagues, and their students' families during times of crisis and suffering? How do we put compassion at the heart of what we do in schools?

Although at relatively beginning stages, there is a growing movement of focusing on cultivating compassion within teaching and learning interactions. Jinpa (2015) proposes:

> Education needs to focus on compassion too. As our world becomes ever more interconnected, our younger generation urgently needs to learn how to relate to others from the perspective of our shared humanity. If we expect our children to maintain their sanity, health, and happiness given the complexity and stress of modern life, we must equip them with cognitive and emotion regulation skills; we must teach them to manage their own minds and tend to their hearts—their own and each other's. (p. 219)

Yet one of the difficulties in deciding how we practise compassion within schools comes from the complexity of understanding, acknowledging, and naming the shared human experience of suffering. Neff (2011) makes a case that

> Compassion, then, involves the recognition and clear-seeing of suffering. It also involves feelings of kindness for people who are suffering so that the desire to help—*(to ameliorate suffering)*—emerges. Finally, compassion involves recognizing our shared human condition, flawed and fragile as it is. (p. 10)

Zembylas (2013) suggests that it may be helpful to reframe this flawed and fragile condition of suffering within educational contexts as, "the recognition of one's own vulnerability" because this "can constitute a powerful point of departure for developing compassion and solidarity with the other's vulnerability" (p. 512). When we begin to search for our "common human vulnerability" (p. 512), teachers and learners are empowered to "move beyond the dichotomies that single out the self or the other as victims, and therefore deserving of someone's pity" (p. 512). I appreciate Zembylas's argument for focusing on a "common human vulnerability," but I recognize the similarities to the discourse in mindfulness and compassion literature about "common human suffering"—the recognition that all humans will experience suffering as part of their lives. As Jinpa (2015) writes, "at its core, compassion is a response to the inevitable

reality of our human condition—our experience of pain and sorrow" (p. xxi). Whether compassion is grounded in "common human vulnerability" or "common human suffering," I agree with Zembylas that it "serves to reinforce a strong connection between the personal and the political and accentuates the interpersonal and interrelational" (p. 513). Cultivating compassion is a conscious choice to connect with others and ourselves with the intention of alleviating suffering.

These shared human experiences of vulnerability and suffering invite empathy. However, Zembylas emphasizes that

> empathetic identification with the plight of others, then, is not a sentimental recognition of sameness—you are in pain and so am I, so we both suffer the same—but a realization of our common humanity, while acknowledging asymmetries of suffering, inequality, and injustice. (p. 513)

If we see compassion as coming together with suffering, then practicing compassion requires individuals to come alongside another's suffering even though they cannot possibly fully know that experience of suffering. Zembylas argues that this kind of compassion

> requires a simultaneous identification and disidentification with the suffering of the other. The simultaneous recognition of symmetry and asymmetry with the other removes the arrogance of claiming that *we* know and feel *their* pain and suffering. This emotional ambivalence of simultaneous identification and disidentification is needed to focus attention on the other's suffering, but not becoming too identified with it. (p. 513)

Becoming too identified with the suffering of the other may mean we somehow take it on as our own. We may then become fixated on our own suffering, so are less able to respond to the

ones who need us to be able to come together with them and to extend our compassionate actions. Jinpa (2105) emphasizes that although compassion is triggered by empathy, it is a far more empowered and outwardly directed than empathy:

> Empathy is critical to elicit our compassion, but if we get stuck in the empathy zone (of emotional resonance) it can be draining and lead to feelings of powerlessness and burnout. Compassion, by contrast, is a more empowered state in which we put our energy into wishing that others be free of suffering and wanting to do something about it. What we need, at least for most of us ordinary souls, is a healthy balance between focusing on ourselves and focusing on others (pp. 11-12)

This more empowered process of identification and disidentifcation to the suffering of others, or this healthier balance of focusing on both ourselves and others can then lead to more sustainable acts of kindness. This is incredibly important for teachers to learn. Teachers see suffering in the lives of their students and their families every day. This suffering can become an overwhelming burden of care for teachers to carry. So, how do teachers practise compassion for others and for themselves? How do they focus their attention on their students' suffering, without being too identified with it? How do they show compassion to themselves so that they are able practise compassion for others?

Sitting with Sadness

I was reminded of how difficult it can be to allow ourselves and others to feel sad, to attend to our suffering, and to simply be with someone when they are hurting when I watched a recent animated film. In Disney Pixar's (2015) movie *Inside Out,* we are invited into the head of 11-year-old Riley as she experiences a move across the country and away from a life that was familiar and precious to her. The film focuses on how the personified emotions that live in

Riley's head (Joy, Anger, Disgust, Fear, and Sadness) work together to guide Riley's reactions to her world so she can make decisions based on how she is feeling. The protagonist of the film is Joy—she is the emotion in charge of helping Riley feel happy, have fun, and see the positive in all situations. Joy is determined to protect Riley's present experiences and past memories from all suffering. Joy's co-worker Sadness has a different role—it is her job to be there for Riley during difficult times and to use inevitable moments of suffering as opportunities to help Riley open up and accept the support and love of others. For most of the movie, Joy does not understand what Sadness has to offer Riley or what her purpose could possibly be, so Joy tries to control Sadness and keep her away from touching Riley's thoughts and memories.

Joy begins to understand the importance of Sadness when she witnesses an act of compassion. In their unexpected travels through Riley's long-term memory, Joy and Sadness run into Riley's imaginary friend Bing Bong. Bing Bong is no longer needed as much or called upon as often in Riley's life as an 11-year-old, but he lingers in long-term memory, along with the red wagon that he and Riley made into a rocket ship, just in case Riley ever remembers their plan to fly to the moon. Bing Bong joins Joy and Sadness on their quest to restore Riley's core memories and return Joy and Sadness to Headquarters (or the central part of Riley's brain where the emotions direct her actions and reactions). As Joy, Sadness, and Bing Bong race towards a "train of thought" that will get them back to Headquarters, Bing Bong's red rocket is tossed into the dump because it is deemed no longer necessary. In the dump, it will fade from Riley's existence.

Bing Bong sits on the edge of a cliff looking at where his rocket and his hopes of flying once again with Riley have disappeared. Joy is completely focused on her plan to return happiness to Riley's immediate life so she has no time for Bing Bong to stop moving or give

into his grief. She tries to reassure Bing Bong that "things are going to be okay" and that they can "fix this"—she tickles him, pulls funny faces, and tries to turn her plan into a game. Nothing Joy does seems to work. Then Sadness comes very quietly and simply sits beside Bing Bong. Together they look to where the rocket disappeared. Sadness says, "I'm sorry they took your rocket. They took something that you loved. It's gone. Forever." Bing Bong begins to talk—he shares how the rocket was all he had left of Riley and then with gentle prompting from Sadness, he begins to remember the adventures he had with her. Sadness once again acknowledges Bing Bong's feelings, "Yeah, it's sad." She is there to hold him when he cries without rushing him or asking him to stop. After Bing Bong's feelings are recognized and he has been able to express his loss and grief, he is once again able to get moving. Joy is confused and asks Sadness how she did what she did. Sadness answers, "I don't know. I saw that he was sad and I listened . . ." Sadness did not see her role as one where she had to fix anything or rush away from the feelings of discomfort or grief. Instead, she simply and gently acknowledged the feelings and allowed space to feel them. She listened and invited memories. She offered compassion. Sadness sat together with suffering.

Practising compassion requires steady courage because "it involves the willingness to feel pain" (Chödrön, 2003, p. 71), rather than jumping to fix, freeze, or fast-forward it. Chödrön (2003) writes, "Compassion practice is daring. It involves learning to relax and allowing ourselves to move gently towards what scares us" (pp. 71-72). Our own suffering, the suffering of others, and deep societal and cultural suffering—it is all frightening stuff, the stuff we usually try to avoid or quickly make better. Yet Chödrön suggests that we need to "cultivate compassion to soften our hearts and also to become more honest and forgiving about when and how we shut down. Without justifying or condemning ourselves, we do the courageous work of

opening to suffering" (p. 73). Once we begin to soften our hearts, we recognize that "when we get what don't want, when we don't get what we do want, when we become ill, when we're getting old, when we're dying—when we see any of these things in our lives—we can recognize suffering as suffering. Then we can be curious, notice, and be mindful of our reactions" (Chödrön, pp. 93-94). Chödrön explains that "the basic ground of compassionate action is the importance of *working with* rather than *struggling against*" (p. 95). Compassion happens when we work with suffering, rather than struggle against it.

For me, as a teacher, there is simple clarity yet deep complexity in that last sentence. It almost takes my breath away: Compassion happens when we work with suffering, rather than struggle against it. When I think of the two accidental crash sites that became the catalysts for practising life writing in this dissertation, I can see many moments when I struggled against my own and others' suffering, but I also recognize important moments when I worked with suffering. Living with cancer was, and continues to be, my most profound experience of awakening to and practising compassion. On a daily and deeply personal level, I learned, lived, and ate compassion. My family, friends, colleagues, medical professionals, and former students were my teachers of compassion. They recognized and came together with my suffering and the suffering of my husband and children by offering their love and support through all sorts of practical ways: meals delivered to our home, housecleaning for the months during chemo, cards and letters letting me know I was cared about, lending me wonderful books, sitting with me, walking with me in the deepest cold of winter, listening, laughing, and helping my children maintain the most "normal" schedule possible. Compassion awakened a network of support that took action to care for my family. In turn, their compassion enabled me to take my own actions of loving-kindness for myself. Just like Bing-Bong, I often needed someone to

recognize that cancer was sad, that it took some things from me that I loved, and that it was scary. That was all I needed. I could then get up, find joy, stick with the plan, and keep going.

My heart was awakened through compassion during my year with cancer and it shifted how I understood the first crash site of my dissertation. Chödrön (2003) states:

> As a result of compassion practice we start to have a deeper understanding of the roots of suffering. We aspire not only that the outer manifestations of suffering decrease but also that all of us could stop acting and thinking in ways that escalate ignorance and confusion. We aspire to be free of fixation and closed-mindedness. We aspire to dissolve the myth that we are separate. (p. 199)

Before cancer, I was largely struggling against suffering as I wrote my dissertation. When I decided to teach about homophobia and transphobia, I did so because I could see suffering happening every day in local and global schools—suffering caused by individual and systemic treatment of gender and sexuality. Yet, when I researched and wrote about my teaching encounter, I struggled against the guilt I was feeling about my privilege as someone who could enter and leave the suffering of this story at my own whim. As a heterosexual, feminine presenting, cisgender woman, I had not suffered the inequities, abuse, and hatred that many of my homosexual, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, gender creative, or questioning students, students' families, and/or colleagues endured daily. I struggled against my insecurities that writing about my imperfect, messy, ally-teaching moments could offer anything in a movement towards social change. Yet, it was through the compassionate practices of others during my experience with cancer that I awakened to the compassion in my teaching story. Mintz (2013) argues:

> As a bridge between individual and community, compassion is a necessary condition for justice. Compassion involves distancing oneself from one's immediate concerns and comforts to direct one's attention to another's suffering. Broadening one's scope is civilizing, as it causes one to be concerned with a greater number of individuals, to recognize their suffering and deliberate about the causes of and remedies for their suffering. (p. 220)

Although my teaching was problematic and flawed, my intentions in designing the learning experience came from compassion: I wanted our community of teacher education students to distance ourselves from our immediate concerns and comforts in order to direct our attention to the suffering of those experiencing gender and/or sexuality discrimination.

When I began to design my lesson, I wanted to teach in a way that would allow my class and me to come together with this suffering: to offer not only a critical lens, but, more importantly, a compassionate stance. I chose to ground some of our class experience in the research study, or climate survey of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools by Taylor et al. (2011), so that we could think critically about students' experiences. Together, we could ask: What was really happening in Canadian schools? Who was most affected by homophobia and transphobia? What role did teachers play in this experience? What were the recommendations for actions to improve what was happening in Canadian schools? I wanted our class to have the chance to increase our understanding. As Nhat Hanh (1987) writes, "the more we see, the more we understand. The more we understand, the easier it is for us to have compassion and love" (p. 111). Critical questions and conversations can provoke understanding, and understanding can inspire compassion. To further invite compassion into our learning space, I offered the poetry of John Guiney Yallop (2010). His poetic narratives

invited me, and hopefully many of my students, to sit with suffering—to hear a teacher's perspective of how hate directly shaped his everyday teaching and living experiences, to see how heteronormative practices like how tickets are sold for a dance can cause suffering to students and staff alike, to sit alongside suffering as a teacher tries to grapple with why there is an empty chair after a permanent act of hopelessness in the classroom next to him.

Rather unexpectedly, at least to me at the time, the first planned lesson on homophobia and transphobia prompted more opportunities to practise compassion. My student's question "Are we going to debrief the last class at *all* today?" became an (un)intentional invitation for compassion: we were being asked to come together with suffering. We could have quickly moved on from the first lesson—left it as an isolated moment, one of many learning experiences that unfolded during the course. In fact, that was my plan. Since I had not heard from students between classes, I did not think more conversation space was needed. Yet the student's request, the shared glances, the tension in the air—all awakened me to be brave enough to soften my heart and move towards what scared me—a non-scripted, out-of-my-control conversation where everyone had an equitable opportunity to express their concerns. As we moved our chairs to form a talking circle, we were coming together with our suffering and we were practising compassion. Some teacher education students showed compassion by telling their stories of their vulnerability or discomfort. Others practised compassion by listening and by allowing silence so that those who felt most compelled to speak had the time and space to do so. Others spoke about how they practised self-compassion when they allowed themselves to work through some of their discomfort with friends or family members who were part of their wider network of support.

During this important talking circle, I now see how I likely over-identified (Zembylas, 2013) with the suffering of my students, so I was temporarily less able to practise compassion for them. Yet now, through time, distance, and many reflective practices, I am able to see how my sobbing during the talking circle became an invitation for compassion. My students were coming together with the suffering of their fellow students, but they were also coming together with my suffering. They were participating in the shared human experience of suffering and seeing that teachers suffer too. As adult learners, my students had the choice to leave the room and not be a part of the suffering of their visibly emotional teacher. Yet not one student left. They remained in the circle. Whether or not they were comfortable or whether or not they believed it was appropriate for their teacher to be crying, they stayed. They might not have known how to react or respond, but they were together with my suffering. The student sitting next to me put her hand on my shoulder. Others reached across the circle to give me reassurance through their words and their reminders of how they saw my best intentions in the plans to talk through a troubling issue. Teachers are often expected to respond compassionately to their students, but I was experiencing my students extending their compassion to me. My students, these future teachers, practised how to respond to raw emotion in a classroom space. In many ways, they were potentially practicing self-compassion. They were giving me words and actions that they may someday need to extend to themselves in moments of crisis and suffering. It was a humbling and transformative gift for both me and my students.

I now recognize another (un)intentional invitation to practise compassion: my doctoral advisory committee identified the story I told about this teaching incident as one that required further inquiry and analysis. “There is a lot going on in this story. Go further;” “There is darkness and pain and suffering there. Go deeper;” “You reveal far more about yourself and

your assumptions than we think you realize. Go inside." I am paraphrasing the feedback I received, but the invitation was extended. I had written the story. I had shared it with my committee. Yet as I told the story in my candidacy exam, I was still *struggling against* my own suffering and the suffering of my students. My committee recognized that there was a great deal I could do to *work with* this suffering. I could not fix or freeze the moment in my classroom, but I could examine this contested space in teacher education. As Kumashiro (2010) suggests, I could re-search "one moment of [my] teaching and re-think the possibilities for change within the particular social, historical, political, and pedagogical context in which it arose" (pp. 122-123). I could learn how to "bear being uncomfortable for a while" (Kumashiro, 2010, p. 31). I could create a compassionate inquiry into my teaching and learning practices through life writing.

Contextualizing Practising Compassion Life Writing Pieces

Tree of Life Mandala

The first piece of life writing I include in this strand is a watercolour pencil tree of life mandala. Fincher (2000) explains that the word "*mandala* from Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, translates as 'sacred circle'" (p. 3). Mandalas became a part of my mindful meditation practices during my cancer treatments after I received a gift of a mandala coloring book. The mandala I include here was first created as part of a yoga retreat that focused on practices of gratitude. At one point in the retreat, our teacher invited us to make a mandala. Fincher (2000) describes the process:

> Creating a mandala begins with drawing a circle. It can be as simple as the circle a child draws or as complex as the sacred images created by Tibetan monks. Mandalas arise from the compelling human need to know our own inner reality, to align this knowing

> with our body's wisdom, and to awaken in ourselves a sense of being in harmony with nature. (p. 3)

The retreat was in the autumn following my diagnosis. The first year anniversary of my surgery had just past and I was grateful for all the year offered. I was also grateful to be here to begin a new cycle of seasons. The tree of life had become an important symbol to me because it represented rootedness, strength, resiliency, and growth. My cancer experience had been marked by distinct seasons: my diagnosis and surgery in the autumn, my chemotherapy in the winter, my radiation in the spring, and my recovery (including hair growth) in the summer. As part of my walking meditation practices, I had walked the same path through a park near my home almost every day in each of the seasons, mindfully aware of the colourful canopy of leaves in autumn, the brave vulnerability of bare trees in winter, the beginning buds of spring, and the full lushness of summer growth. So when I was invited to create a mandala that represented my gratitude, I began to sketch a tree of life in all seasons. From each of the four seasons, I drew four roots in a distinct colour that I braided together to make the outside of the sacred circle.

It was at about the same time as the yoga retreat that I was re-entering my work on my dissertation. I was beginning to come to know the methodology of life writing and literary métissage. I read about why Chambers et al. (2012) decided to shape their life writing as four-strand braids:

> In all places and contexts, they [four-strand braids] evoke both strength and beauty, making a textured material sturdier and more robust, and more complex than a flat braid with fewer strands. Four-strand round braids, because they are made with multi-coloured

> string, silk, or rawhide, are also more aesthetically engaging through their intricacy of colour, textures, and materials, resulting in a highly decorative appeal. (p. xxiv)

When I read about their approach to imagining, designing, and producing life-writing texts as a four-strand braid (see Chapter 1 for a reminder about this process), I returned to the mandala I had created as part of the retreat. I looked anew at the four-stranded braid of roots that had composed the outer circle. I thought about how Fincher (2000) writes, "creating mandalas reflects your inner experience in art-work so that you can study, understand, and integrate the messages from the unconscious" (p. 11). I wondered, what were the four strands of my mandala roots representing? Fincher also proposes, "mandalas lead you into deeper exploration of your spirituality, help you focus on thoughts that are difficult to put into words, and present new solutions to difficult questions" (p. 21). Creating the mandala was an exploratory process that helped me name the four roots of what I believe are needed to become a stronger, more beautiful, more resilient teacher and learner: practising vulnerability, practising discomfort, practising mindfulness, and practising compassion. With this braided structure for my dissertation in mind, I returned to revise and re-draw my mandala. In *20 Ways to Draw a Tree,* Renouf (2013) writes:

> The way we "see" a subject also affects our drawing. Our focus may vary widely. Perhaps we are interested in shape, texture, line, quality or colour? Maybe our focus is on the decorative element of the object? When we draw, we are able to use our personal responses to the subject matter to highlight, enhance, ignore, or omit certain aspects that we find particularly interesting or, alternatively, unappealing . . . . Each time our focus changes, our drawn response changes, too. (pp. 4 - 5)

The revised and re-drawn mandala was more fluid, bright, and colourful. I wanted the lines to show dynamic movement and the colourful roots to represent a rainbow of diversity.

"A Lately Realisation"

I wrote this poem many seasons ago—on that unseasonably warm spring day in Boston when my young teacher self wandered and wrote poetry (see Chapter 4). This poem was written as a compassionate gift to my younger self. At age twenty-five I realized I was living the adult life I had always hoped I would live, so I imagined telling my fifteen-year-old self about the wonders ahead of her. It also became a compassionate gift to my future self. Ten years later I would be diagnosed with cancer—something I could not know at the time I was writing. This poem reminds me of all the joys that are in my life, all the experiences I am grateful for, and all the ways I want to live so that I continue to have few regrets.

"Compassion" Comic

"Compassion" is a three-panel continuation of the "Fallen Super Hero" comic (see Chapter 2). "Fallen Super Hero" ended, or was to be continued, as the teacher figure sat alone, wrapping her once super hero cape around her like a blanket. She does not know what to do next for herself as a teacher. How does one rise after one has fallen so hard? How does one bear being uncomfortable for a while (Kumashiro, 2010)? We now return to the three panels that were blank in the original comic so we can witness an act of self-compassion. Jinpa (2015) defines self-compassion as "a gentle, caring, clear-seeing yet nonjudgmental orientation of our heart and mind toward our suffering and needs" (p. 29). Neff (2011) conceptualizes self-compassion as being composed of three "core components":

> First, it requires *self kindness,* that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental. Second, it requires recognition of our *common*

> *humanity,* feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering. Third, it requires *mindfulness*—that we hold our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it. (p. 41, italics in the original)

Self-compassion is incredibly important for personal health and wellbeing, as well as for our capacity to sustain compassion for others, yet it is a concept that many people struggle to practise. Jinpa argues this is because "contemporary culture makes it hard for many of us to have compassion for ourselves" (p. 27). While many people find it quite easy and natural to extend empathy and kindness to others, they struggle to do so for themselves, because they might feel this kind of self-care is a form of narcissism or self-indulgence. Jinpa challenges us to think differently about self-compassion because it is "totally different from narcissistic self-absorption. Truly self-compassionate people take care of themselves while being attentive to the feelings and needs of those around them. In fact, the mental and physical health that comes from being kind to ourselves enable us to take *better* care of other people" (p. 28). Neff also encourages self-compassionate practices:

> We need to stop for a breath or two and acknowledge that we are having a hard time, and that our pain is deserving of a kind, caring response. Otherwise, our suffering will go unattended, or, feelings of stress and worry will only mount. We risk getting burned out, exhausted, and overwhelmed, because we're spending all our energy trying to fix external problems without remembering to refresh ourselves internally. (p. 81)

This short comic is an attempt to show my own internally refreshing practices of self-compassion I have been cultivating throughout this life writing process.

At one point in my writing process, I imagined writing a third act to the "In the Closet" play. Before cancer, I envisioned returning to key moments in the play and having a critical friend character (another version of the teacher self) interrogate Wonder(ing) Woman about her choices of language or action, helping her to unpack her own assumptions and biases. After cancer, I needed the friend to be compassionate, rather than critical. I imagined what my bald, hospital-gown-wearing, mindfulness practising self would say or do if she witnessed the teaching encounter. How would she remind Wonder(ing) Woman to be gentle with herself? How would she offer compassion as she sat beside her in the talking circle? How would she urge Wonder(ing) Woman to be mindful to everyone in the circle, to the silences, to the opportunities for transformative learning? The more I thought about this compassionate friend as a character, the more I believed she would be silent. The critical friend would have been a talker: questioning, asking Wonder(ing) Woman to explain, justify, or revise her decisions. There would be dialogue between a critical friend and Wonder(ing) Woman. Yet with this compassionate friend character, I imagined a simple, steady, reassuring presence. Here on stage, there would be this self from the not-so-distant future who would come together with Wonder(ing) Woman's suffering. The compassionate character's presence would be a reminder that Wonder(ing) Woman could live through this crash, get back up, awaken, move forward, and face other moments of crisis and uncertainty. Together these characters could become more mindful of what was there for them to see, learn, and feel in that moment—not fix, freeze, or fast-forward anything. Kabat-Zinn (2012) writes:

> While mindfulness is about cultivating bare attention, discernment, clear seeing, and wisdom, at the same time it is important to bring an *affectionate* quality to the attending—an openness to whatever may arise, along with a degree of kindness and a

> willingess to extend our intrinsic compassion to embrace even ourselves. (Kabat-Zinn, p. 53, italics in the original)

I imagined including a character in this last act that would personify the affectionate quality of self-compassion.

In these three short panels, we watch as my chemo comic self (see Chapter 1) comes simply to sit with my teacher's sadness. She comes together with suffering. Wordlessly the two characters reach for each other to rise, and begin to journey again together. Neff (2011) writes that "self-compaasion gives us the calm courage needed to face our unwanted emotions head-on. Because escape from painful feelings in not actually possible, our best option is to clearly but compassionately experience our difficult emotions just as they are in the present moment" (p. 124). As the two selves meet each other, sit for a moment in sadness, and then together find the courage to get up and move forward, we witness the self-compassion teachers need on a daily basis. Teaching can be a place where we encounter suffering. We need to be able to see this suffering for what it is and offer ourselves kindness. Jinpa (2015) proposes:

> Although we might never be free from suffering, we can give up and wallow in (self)-pity and despair. Or we can close up and harden our heart. Alternatively we could choose to be with our predicament and emerge from our experience a little wiser, a little more patient, and a little kinder. Compassion practice helps us choose this wiser course, in our engagement with the very human condition of suffering. (p. 132)

My reason for engaging so closely with this teaching moment through life writing practices grew out of my intention to emerge from my experience a little wiser, a little more patient, and a little kinder. To me, that sounds like the kind of goal and intention that could be important and empowering for teacher education students to hear repeatedly during the initial stages of

their professional learning: You will experience suffering, crisis, and mistakes, but you can emerge wiser, more patient, and kinder if you give yourself time and space to practise self-compassion. Let that wiser, more patient, kinder part of yourself sit with you during your moments of uncertainty and discomfort. Help yourself be brave enough to get back up and find a new path.

When I drew my chemo comic self beside my fallen super hero self, I felt like I had found the most appropriate mode to show this compassionate friend's powerful presence. Roswell (2013) describes multimodality as "an orchestration of multiple modes to communicate, represent, and express meanings" (p. 6). As Kress (2010) writes, "different modes offer different potentials for making meaning. These different potentials have a fundamental effect on the choice(s) of mode in specific instances of communication" (p. 79). I chose print-based modes for my closet play, since I wanted it to be a life-writing and life-reading experience, rather than a staged performance. Therefore, if I introduced this new character in a third act of a written play, the compassionate friend would remain in the mode of print. When I worked with comics, I could represent more modes—gesture, textiles, movement, visual image. The character could remain wordless but still communicate a great deal. As Pahl & Roswell (2006) write, "the mulitimodal offers wider affordances than print-based literacy. It stretches out meaning" (p. 6). I believe this three-panel comic stretches out the meaning of the importance of self-compassion for the resiliency and wellbeing of teachers in crisis.

Count Down Collages

Inspired by how the process of making a collage had helped me make new meaning during my dissertation process (see Chapter 4), I decided to try a similar process to help me make new meaning in my recovery from cancer. When we shared the news about my diagnosis

and the plan for multiple rounds of treatment, I began to receive a vast number of beautiful cards and messages from people near and far and from all different networks in my life. When teacher education students I had worked with the previous year found out about my news, they gathered together and almost every student wrote a card or letter. The cards, along with flowers, a new journal, and a homemade casserole were delivered by two of my former students (one whose mother was a survivor of breast cancer and had been diagnosed when my student was about my daughter's age). I was humbled and honoured by the generous acts of compassion that were being delivered to me daily. I had so many cards I could no longer find space to display them all.

As the time for my chemotherapy treatments crept closer, I wanted a way to keep track of the experience, to break it down, and to remind myself to take it one day at a time. I knew I might easily get overwhelmed by the idea of six rounds of chemotherapy—each round scheduled three weeks apart (as long as my blood count numbers were healthy enough), translating into a minimum of eighteen weeks of treatments. I am a planner, organizer, and lover of to do lists and calendars, so I created for myself a bright bold bulletin board that I placed in my bedroom directly across from my bed. I put many of my favourite quotations around the outside of the board. Then on one side of the board I placed a calendar that I printed for each month between December and June. At end of each day, just before bed, I crossed off the day on the calendar. It was my ritual to remind myself to be grateful for the day and to give myself hope that we were progressing through this time of uncertainty. Once I began my chemo treatments, I put a collaged number six on the other side of the board. I created collages of the numbers one to six from the multitude of messages of compassion I had received from my loved ones, so that I would have a way to visually count down my progress through

treatments. Each time I began the next round, I put up a new number. My children were always excited when the number changed, because it helped remind them that we were moving through this experience. I would remind them each time that the images on the numbers came from all the people who were thinking about us, caring for us, and sending positive energy into the universe for us. I used the numbers again to count down each of the five weeks of my radiation treatments.

Update

The last cancer piece of this dissertation is an email update that I sent to my network of support after my fifth round of chemotherapy. I chose this piece for this strand because it shows how I practiced compassion for myself and received compassion from others during a more difficult time in the treatment process. It was through self-compassion that I was able to see how cancer was helping me become real, a process that is beautifully described in the passage from *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1975/1922) that I use to conclude the email.

Love Letters to Teachers

For the final piece of life writing in this literary métissage, I have created an alphabet book called *Love Letters to Teachers*. After I wrote the letter of complaint (see Chapter 3), I found a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) that seemed relevant and inspirational: "There is a lot of anger, frustration, and misunderstanding in the peace movement. The peace movement can write very good protest letters, but they are not yet able to write a love letter" (p. 81). As I reflected upon Nhat Hanh's words, I could see the connection to educational contexts, since I believe a lot of anger, frustration, and misunderstanding exists in the teaching profession. Although my letter of complaint focused on how teachers are not empowered to protest or complain effectively about the things that matter most in education, Nhat Hanh's statement left

me wondering about whether teachers are actually much better at writing protest letters than love letters. Then I wondered the same thing about myself—was it easier for me to write letters of protest criticizing what is wrong in education systems than write letters of love to teachers and students thanking them for all that is right in our lived learning communities? I wondered, how can words of love, reassurance, acknowledgment, and gratitude become a compassionate balm for teachers who may be wounded by their own crashes or exhausted after carrying a heavy burden of care? I thought of how Cameron (1998) suggests that writing is a way for us to begin putting who we want to be into practice, "if I put it on the page, it is only a matter of time before I put it into practice. First I observe with more compassion and then I act with more compassion. First I feel my own vulnerability and then I have empathy for the vulnerability of others" (p. 146). If I could put on the page my love and compassion for teachers and teacher candidates, I would also hopefully be reminded to act with love and compassion each time I work with teachers. I decided I needed to write a love letter to in-service and pre-service teachers for my final practising compassion strand.

I started writing a traditional letter addressed to the past, present, and future teachers and teacher education students in my life. I had so much I wanted to say, but I was struggling to find the right way to express myself. At about the same time I was drafting this letter, I was also writing a course syllabus for an undergraduate education class teaching English Language Arts in the senior years. Lying in bed one night, I was sleepily thinking about possible writing pieces teacher education students could create as part of a portfolio that would give them opportunities to practice being writers. I thought of how alphabet books about who a person is or the place that they come from or the things that they are passionate about can become significant identity texts (Flor Ada & Campoy, 2004; Cummins & Early, 2011). Suddenly, in a

moment that jolted me fully awake, I made the connection to the love letter I was attempting to write for my dissertation. If I made an alphabet book, I could write love *letters* to teachers. The idea had my head swimming—my heart flooding with possible words for each letter. I had to get up out of the warmth of my bed to find my journal. If I could put down some of these potential words on the page, maybe I could convince my mind to quiet into sleep once again.

The next morning I was telling my husband about my new idea for the love letter alphabet book. I began to share some of the words I had come up with for each letter. My daughter was in the next room and she came in to give me some alternative suggestions for some of the letters. She also began to give me ideas for how I could illustrate each word—even grabbing the pencil from me to sketch her ideas beside each letter in my journal. We worked on the sketching of ideas again that night as we lay together in her bed at the usual time I read to her as part of our bedtime ritual. I was warmed by how these love letters to teachers were being shaped out of this love story between my daughter and me, and her love story with all of the amazing teachers she has had in her educational journey so far. I knew this alphabet book would have a much greater significance to me if my children could help me illustrate the pages. After talking to my supervisor to confirm that I would not be systematically researching or interpreting the work, but rather collaborating on art with my children, I got started on the project.

I knew exactly what paper I wanted to use to design each page. Three of the students from the class of teacher education students that had gathered cards, gifts, and food were away on a practicum in Thailand when they heard about my news. Since they could not contribute to the class gift, the three of them got together and put together a package of things for me and sent their letters and gifts from Thailand. One part of their package was a beautiful journal with

gorgeous cream, brown, and black pages—they had put a sticky note just inside the front cover—"For when you need to write, play, or discover." I knew I wanted to save it for a special project. When I thought about composing love letters to teachers and teacher education students, I knew I wanted to make it out of the pages from this love story between my students and me. I *love* working with teacher education students. I *love* building meaningful relationships with my students and getting to know who they are and who they want to become. I *love* that I ache a little when a course ends because our relationships will change and fade and I won't be in daily contact with the ongoing stories in my students' lives. When I received the gifts, letters, and blank pages from my students, I felt part of a reciprocal love story. The journal seemed the perfect pages to express my love to teachers.

Each page of the alphabet book is composed of a letter, a word made from letters I cut from magazines, a short blessing for teachers at whatever stage in their career they might be, and an illustration. My children, the loves of my life, have created most of the illustrations using watercolour pencils and Sharpie markers. My son created the illustrations for the letters a, e, f, I, p, q, u, and x. My daughter created the illustrations for the letters b, d, h, j, k, m, o, s, t, v, and w. The rest of the illustrations I created while I sat alongside my children making art at our kitchen island. Making our book was a project of coming together. Making our book was another love story, another practice of compassion.

We worked on this *Love Letters to Teachers* alphabet book shortly before Christmas. My children asked if they could give a copy of the book to their classroom teachers, their music teachers, and to their grandma who is a vice principal and school counsellor in an elementary school in Alberta. I also decided to make some copies for a few of my teacher friends. Suddenly, this section of life writing was being disseminated to a real audience of teachers I

deeply admire. In all likelihood, this part of my dissertation might be the most widely read by the teachers and teacher education students that I know and live alongside in relationships. It seemed like the perfect last life writing piece in a dissertation project that has felt like a love story from beginning to end.

Figure 9: Tree of Life Mandala

A Lately Realisation

Lately
I have come to the startling and stunning
Realisation (Realization with a "z" in North America)
That I have become the kind of adult I always wanted to be.

I am a teacher, a poet, a lover, a traveler, a fine appreciator of life.
I have run a marathon (no, really, honestly I have).
I laugh, a lot, every day.
I make up songs and talk to myself and compose great writings in my head.

I go on bike rides through the undulating Oxfordshire countryside.
Then bask at pubs overlooking the rolling green.
Enthralled with and appreciative of chicken salad on soft thick bread
And how my Diet Pepsi has four melting ice cubes and a slice of succulent lemon.

I have lingered at a table with the ones I love at an autumnal Tuscan village
Sipping Chianti and eating cheese on sticks.
I have danced my bare feet on the rich, red African Clay
Celebrating similarities between continents.

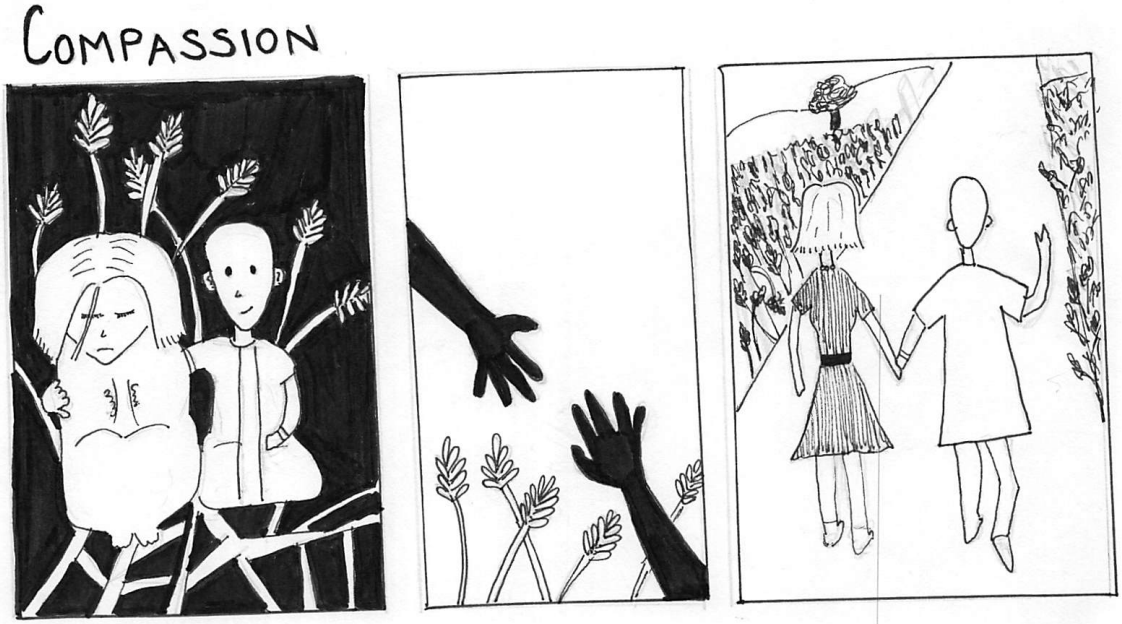
The love of my life is my best friend.
We're starting to try to have a family.
We giggle and whisper and fairy-tale dream
About the lives of our not-yet-conceived-but-already-loved children.

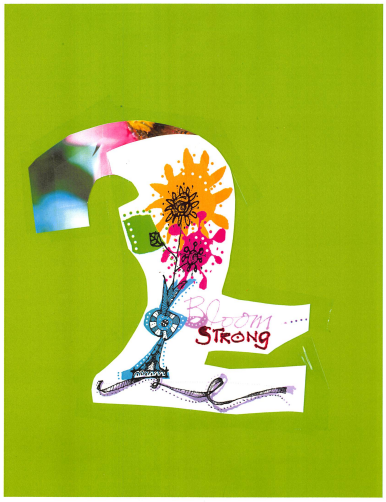
I feel equally at home and strange in
Two different countries / two different worlds.
I'm used to living (or getting used to living) in the
Here and Now (because my tomorrows are always changing).

I seek the sunshine.
I like going to bed before ten.
I mostly love my job.
I always feel busy.

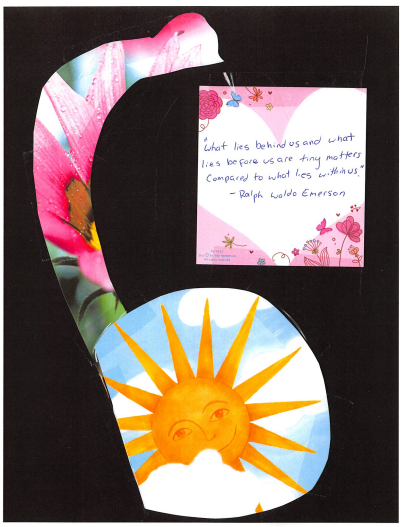
And the part of me now, at twenty-five,
That would have excited me then, at fifteen,
Is that I still look forward to everything
And regret very little.

Boston, 2003


COMPASSION


Bloom
STRONG


"Believe you can and you're
half way there."
– Theodore
Roosevelt


"What lies behind us and what
lies before us are tiny matters
Compared to what lies within us."
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Update

From: **Jennifer Watt** (jenwatt@email.com)
Sent: March-09-14 12:57:25 PM
To: My dedicated circle of friends and family who became my beloved support team

Hello all,

Daring greatly is not about winning or losing. It's about courage. In a world where "never enough" dominates and feeling afraid has become second nature, vulnerability is subversive. Uncomfortable. It's even a little dangerous at times. And, without question, putting ourselves out there means there's a far greater risk of getting criticized or feeling hurt. But when we step back and examine our lives, we will find that nothing is as uncomfortable, dangerous, and hurtful as believing that we're standing on the outside of our lives looking in and wondering what it would be like if we had the courage to show up and let ourselves be seen. (Brown, 2012, pp. 248 - 249)

I wanted to share another update on my last two rounds of chemo. I began a new drug treatment with number 4 chemo on Feb. 11th and I am now on the same treatment for number 5 (March 4th). My white blood count numbers were a little too low, but my oncology doctors decided that if I began to take Neupogen injections (to help build white blood cells) for 7 days for each of the final chemo treatments then I should be able to keep going and hopefully stay on schedule. This new chemo drug has seemed easier on my tummy and I am on no anti-nausea drugs, so I feel more alert. The trade-off is more aches and pains in my muscles and joints (the Neupogen adds to this). I am definitely walking a little slower for about the first 10 days of the cycle, but I am still walking every day and for that I am filled with genuine gratitude.

I must admit that Cycle 4 seemed long and I had some darker moments . . . it felt like I had been going through this for a long time and I still had a long way to go. However, I pulled myself out of my moping mode by spending special time with each of my children . . . I took each out of school for one mental health day one-on-one with Mom. I think it did us all a world of good. I was also so thankful for the wonderful meals and baking that have come into our home with messages of love and hope from all our delightful friends. It is hard to feel alone when as a family we are smelling, tasting, seeing, and feeling care from others in such tangible forms on a daily basis.

The last cycle (number 5) has seemed much more positive. I have been doing more restorative yoga and mindfulness practices to relax deeply and ease my aching joints. The warmer weather, bright sunshine, and knowing that I will likely enter my last round of chemo before March is over really helps bring me back to a more positive frame of mind. After my chemo is over, I will have 4-6 weeks of recovery and then I will begin 5 weeks of daily radiation treatments. We are getting there . . . and just like the promise of spring seems so much closer, so too does the promise of making it through the chemo stage of my recovery journey.

I thought I'd end with a little passage from *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1975/1922), because it really has spoken to me about my experience—especially since I have lost all my

eyelashes and most of my eyebrows in the last two rounds of chemo. It really talks about the process of becoming real and I certainly think cancer is helping me become more and more real every day:

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real."

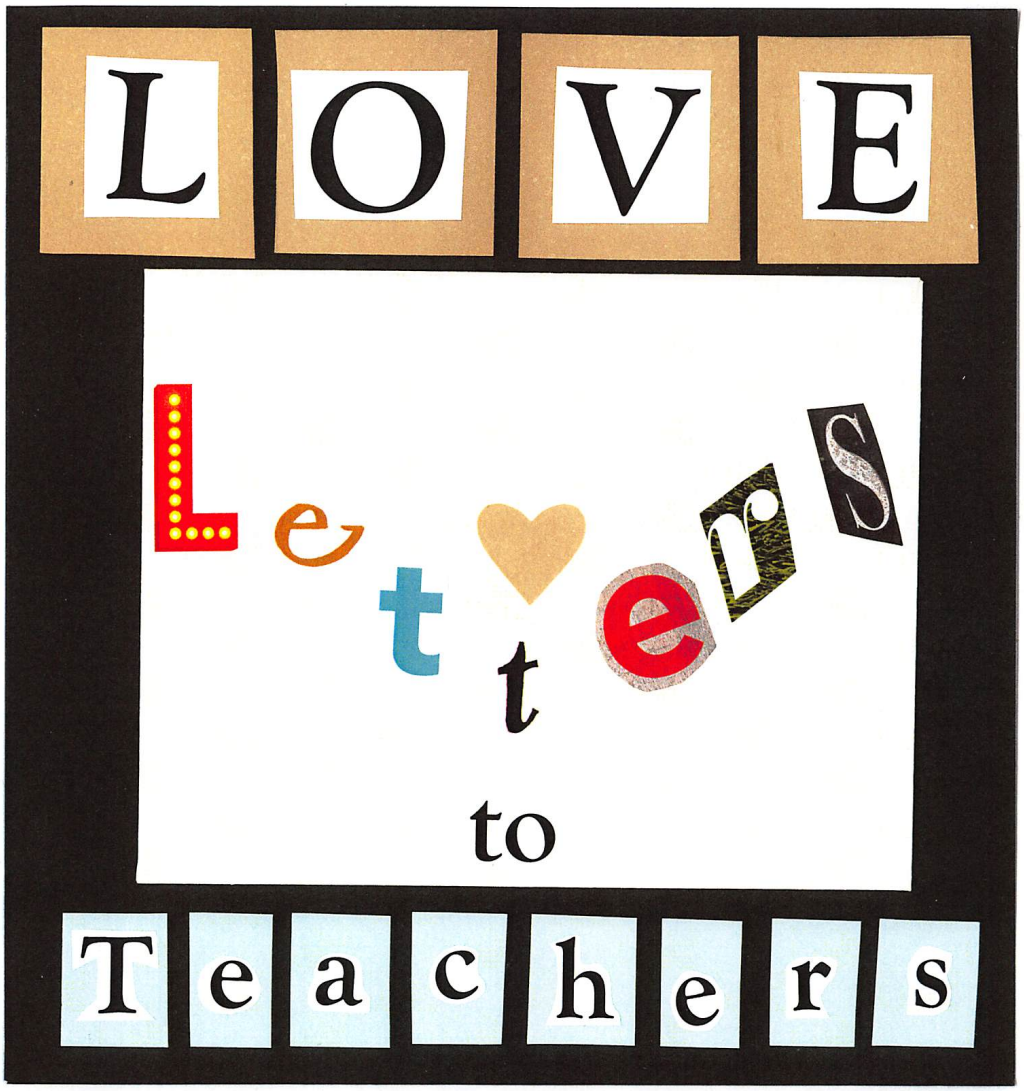
"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

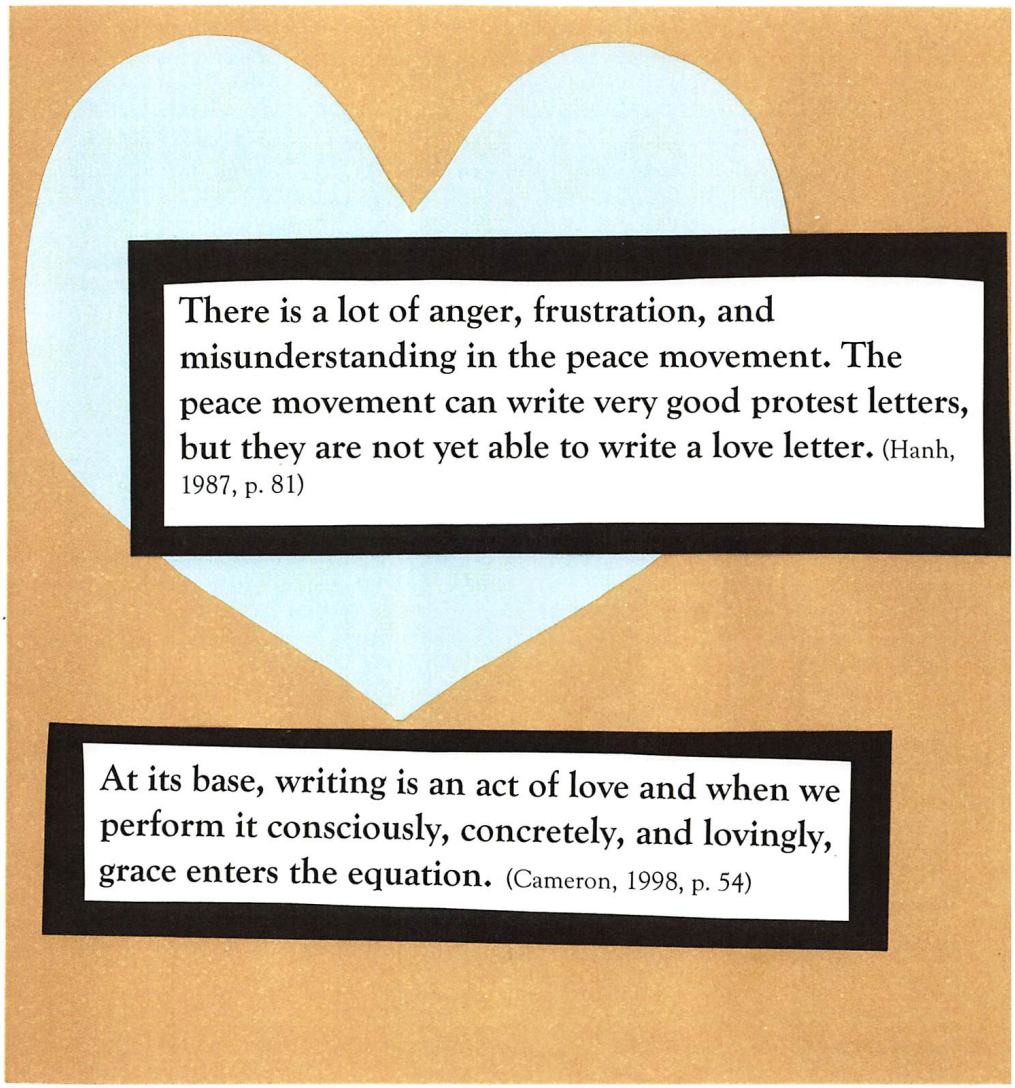
"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt."

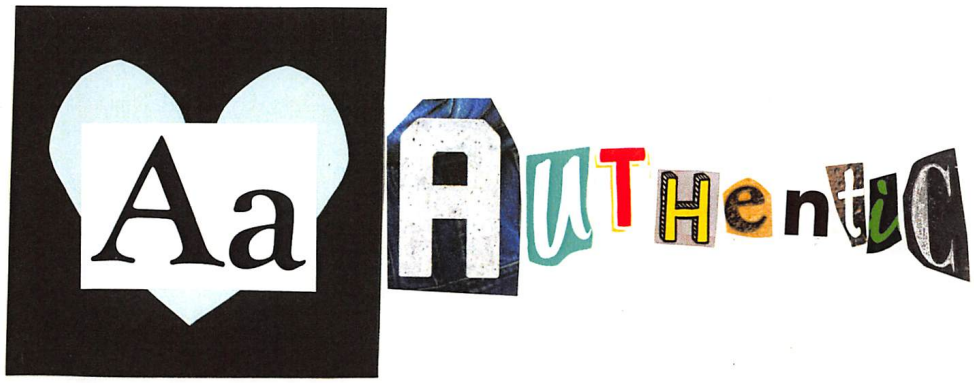
"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But those things don't matter at all, because once you are Real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

My sincere thanks to all of you—my people who understand,
Jen

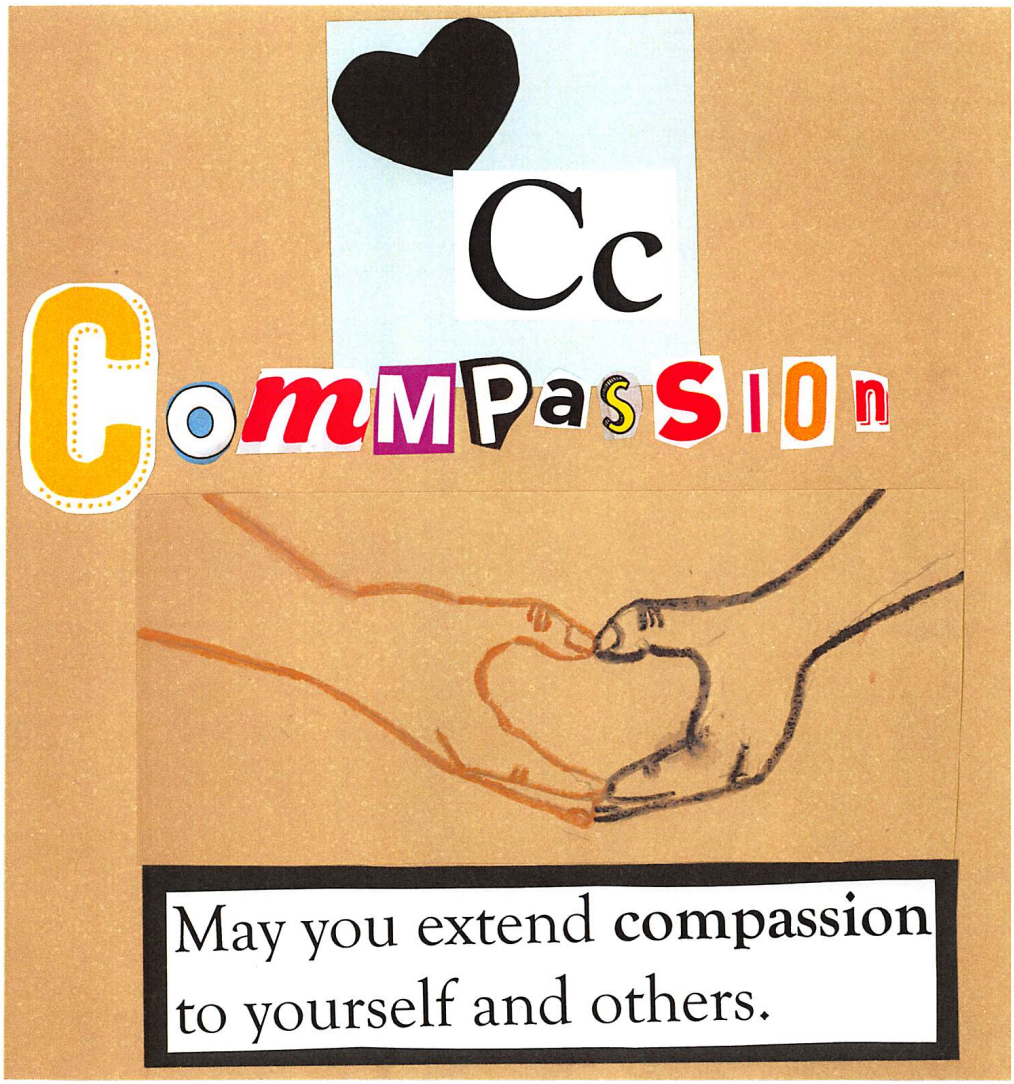

LOVE
Letters
to
Teachers

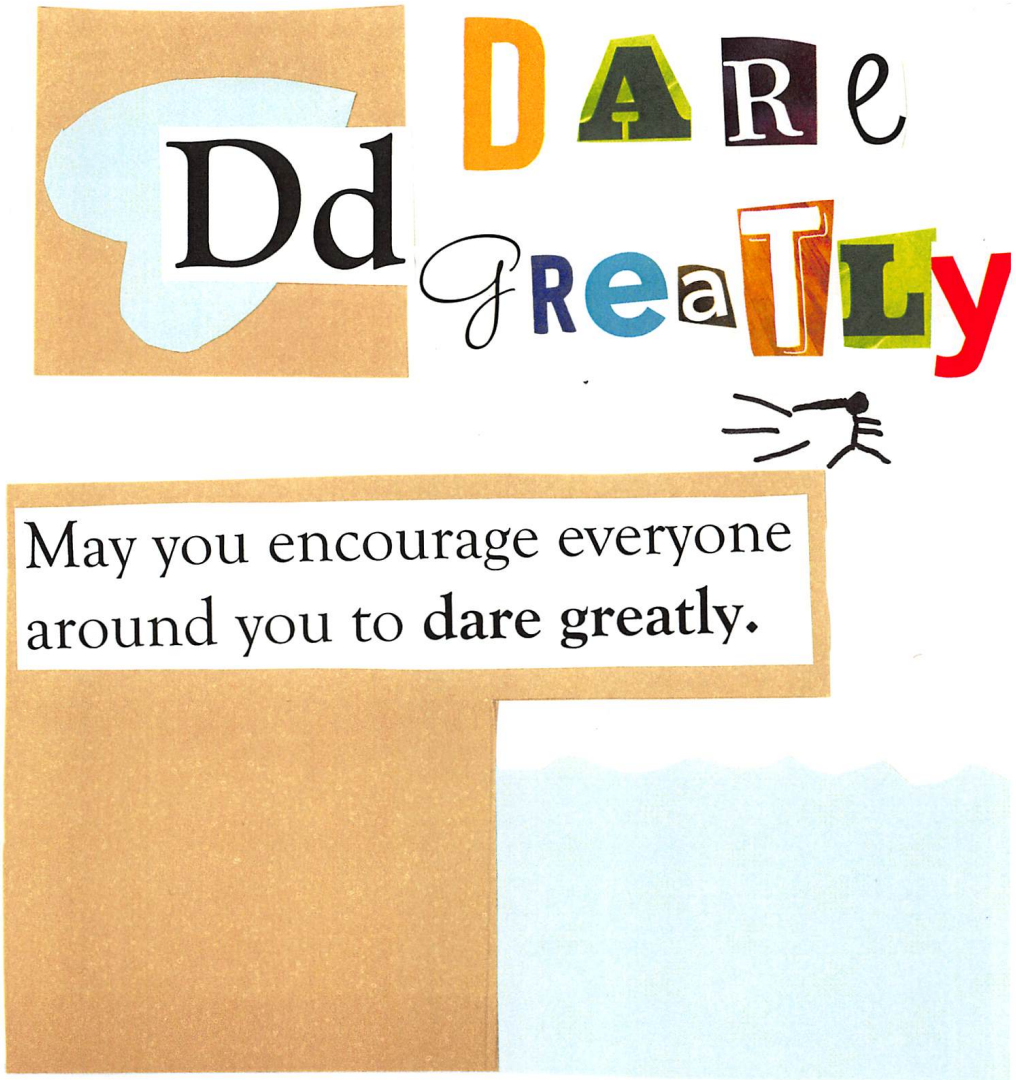

There is a lot of anger, frustration, and misunderstanding in the peace movement. The peace movement can write very good protest letters, but they are not yet able to write a love letter. (Hanh, 1987, p. 81)
At its base, writing is an act of love and when we perform it consciously, concretely, and lovingly, grace enters the equation. (Cameron, 1998, p. 54)

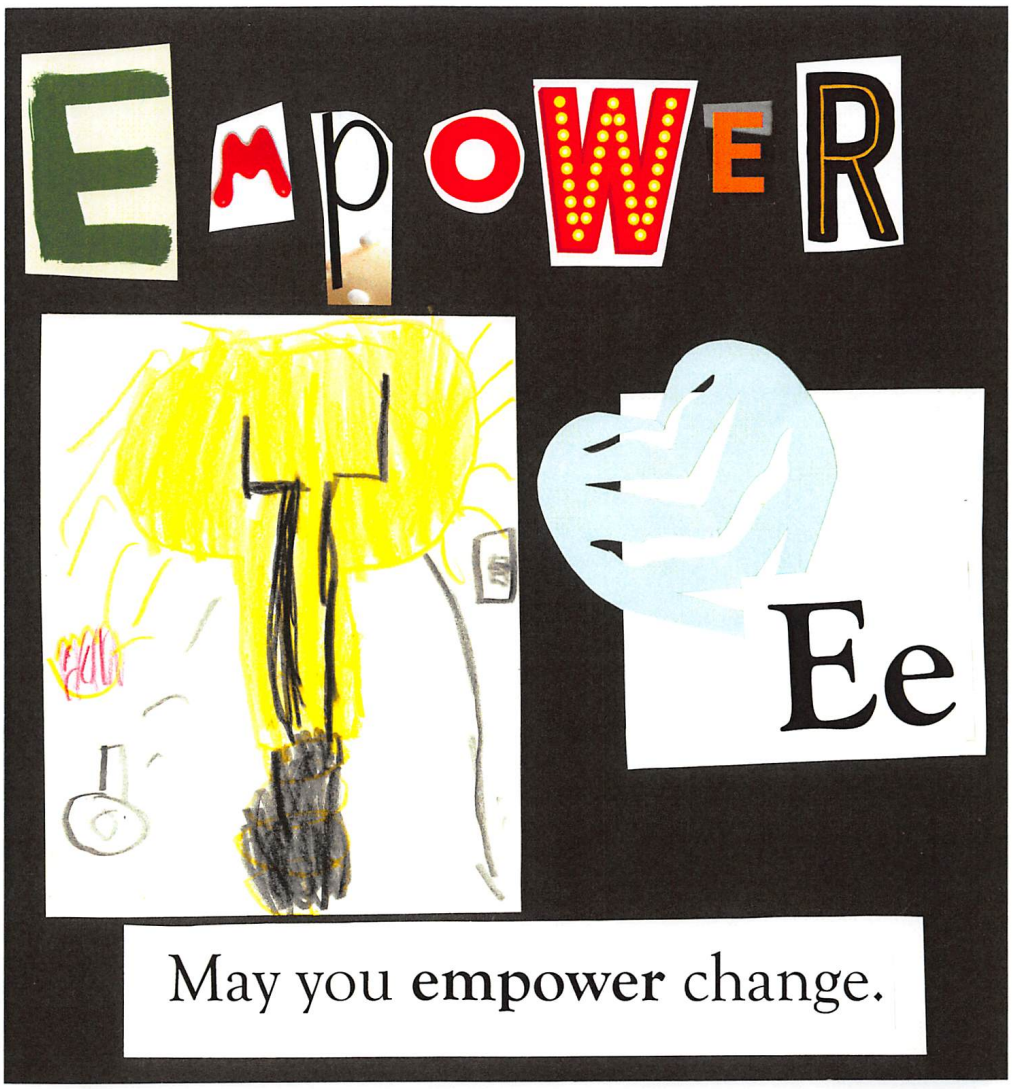


May you always be at home in your true **authentic** self.

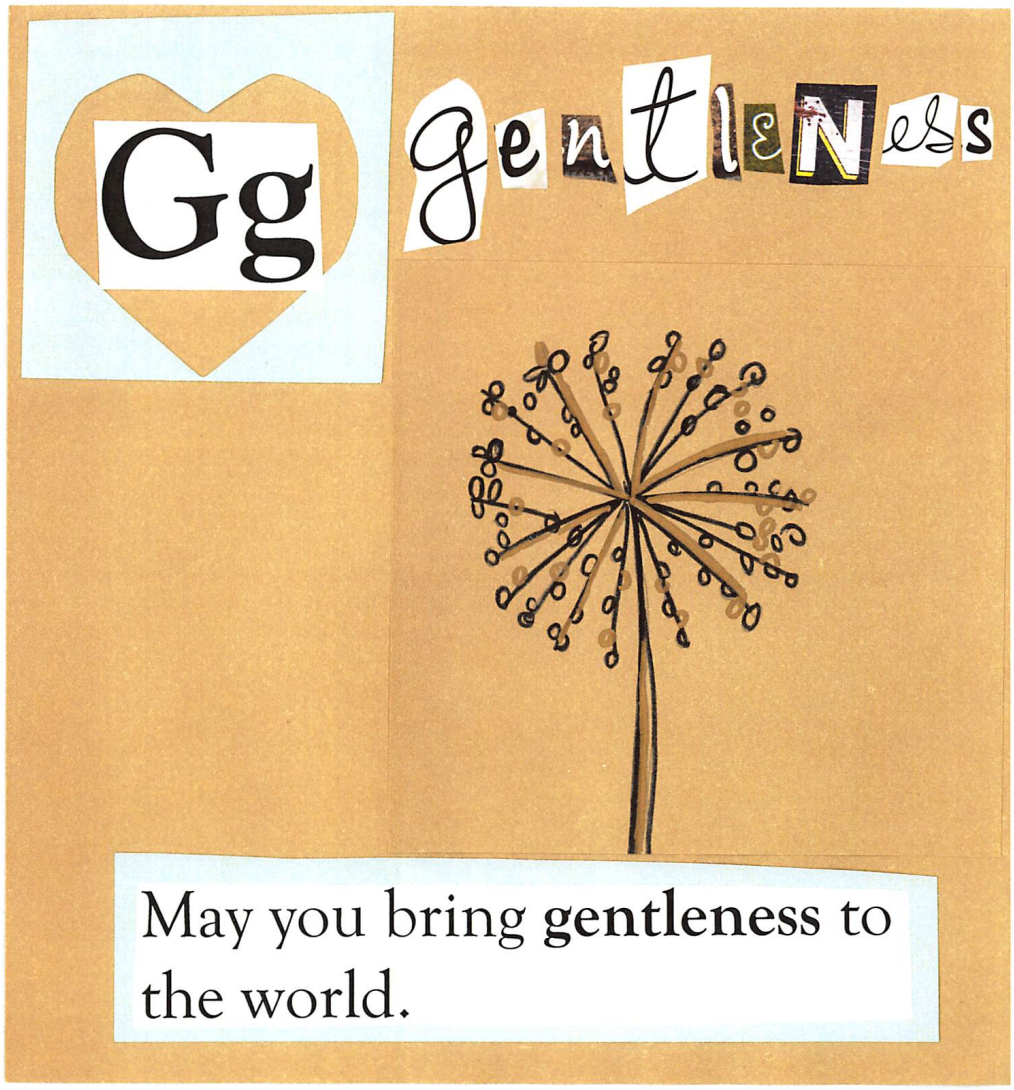

Bb
Becoming
May you trust in the on-going process of **becoming**.

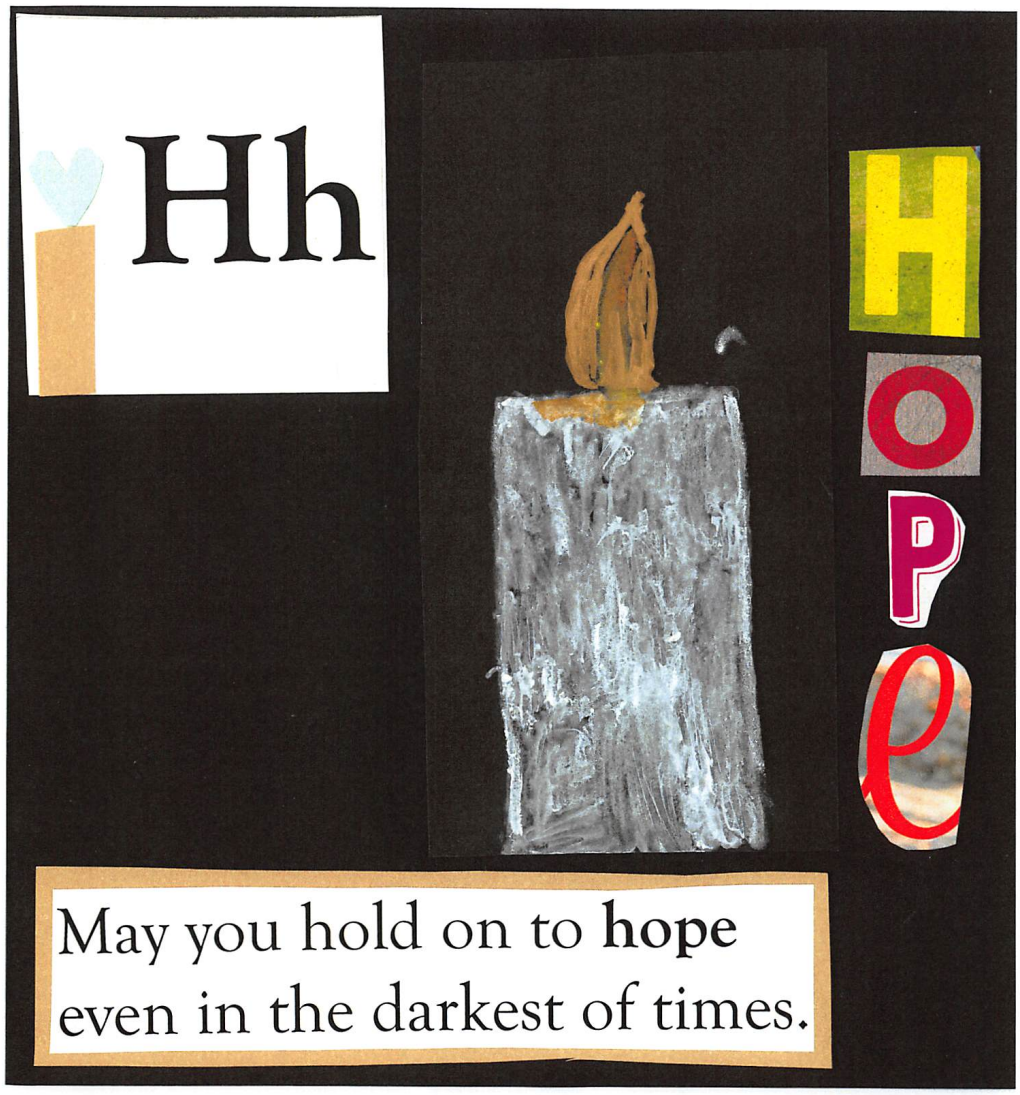

Cc
Compassion
May you extend compassion
to yourself and others.

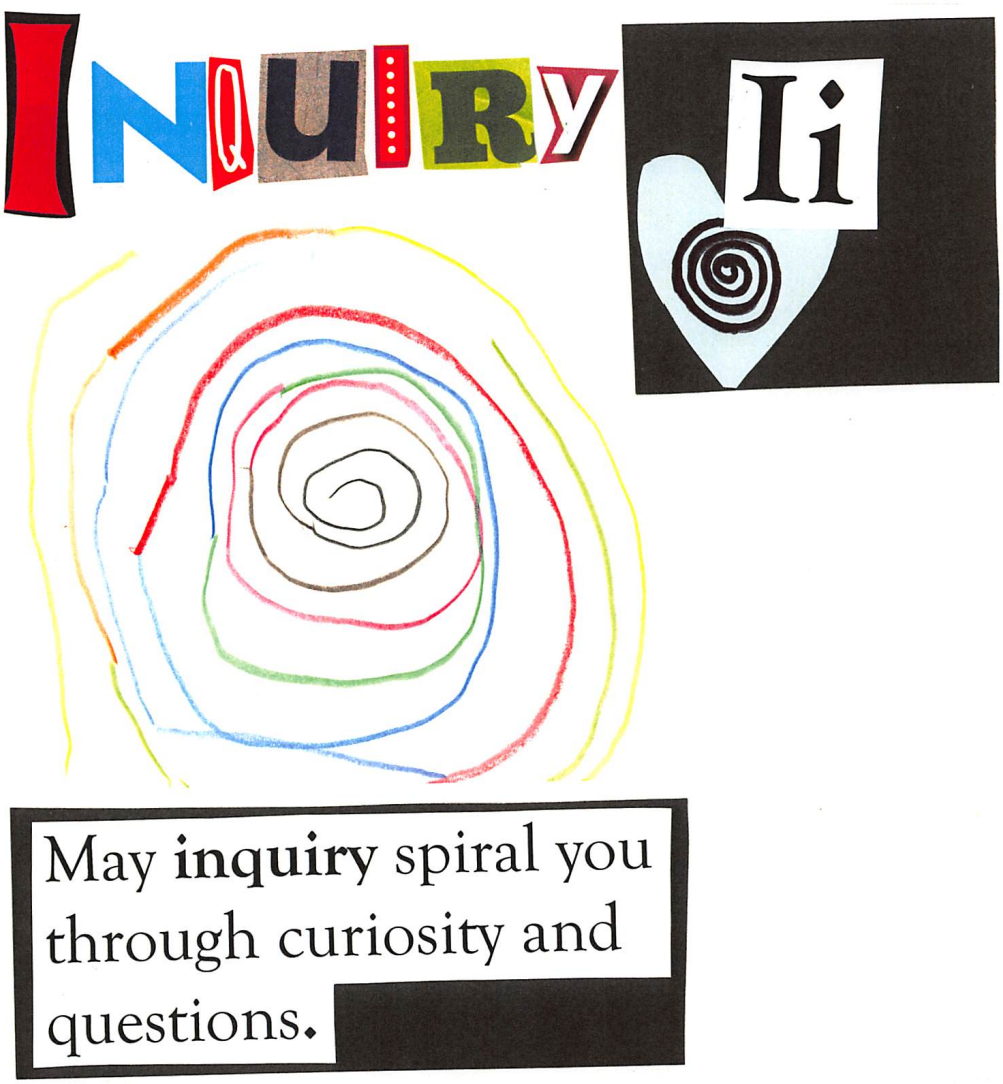

Dd
DARe
GreaTLy
May you encourage everyone around you to **dare greatly.**

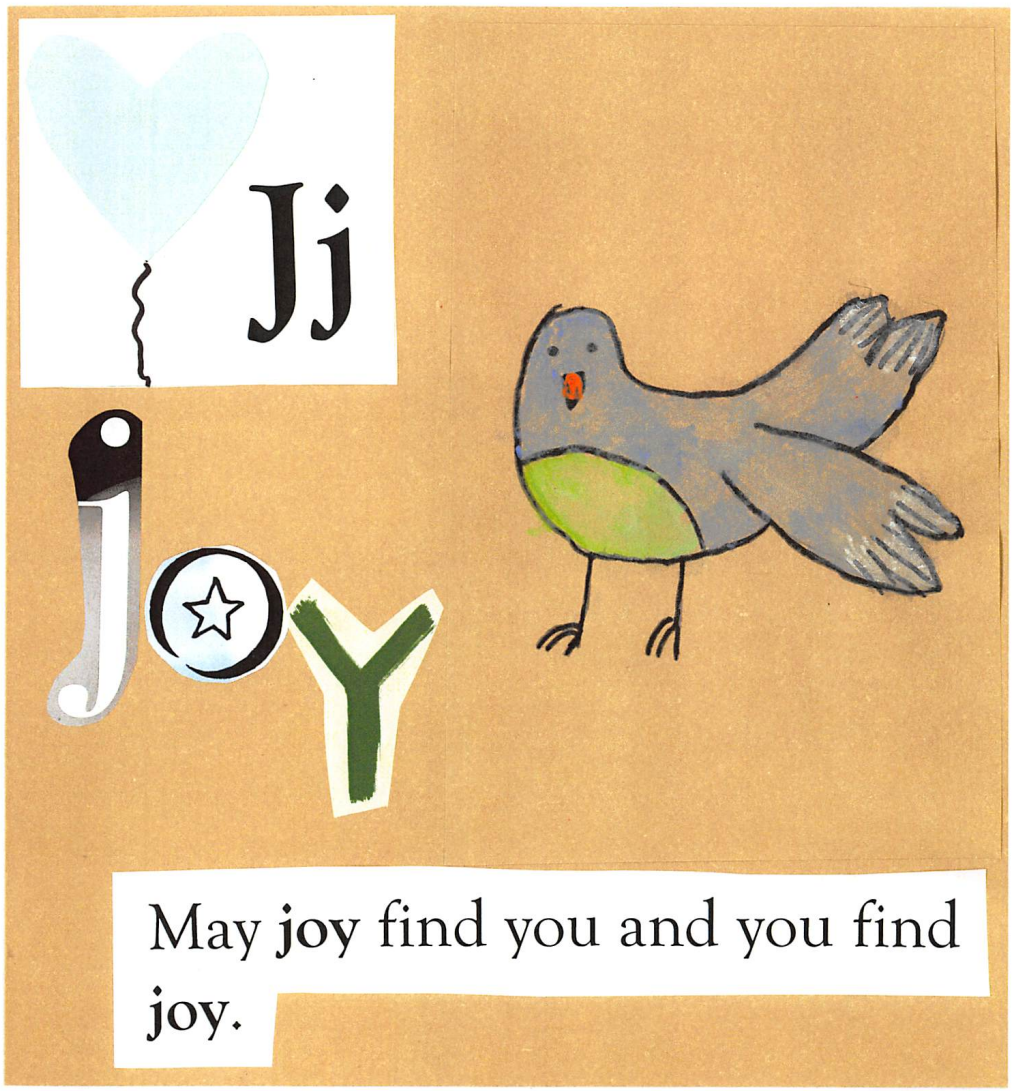

EMPOWER
Ee
May you **empower** change.

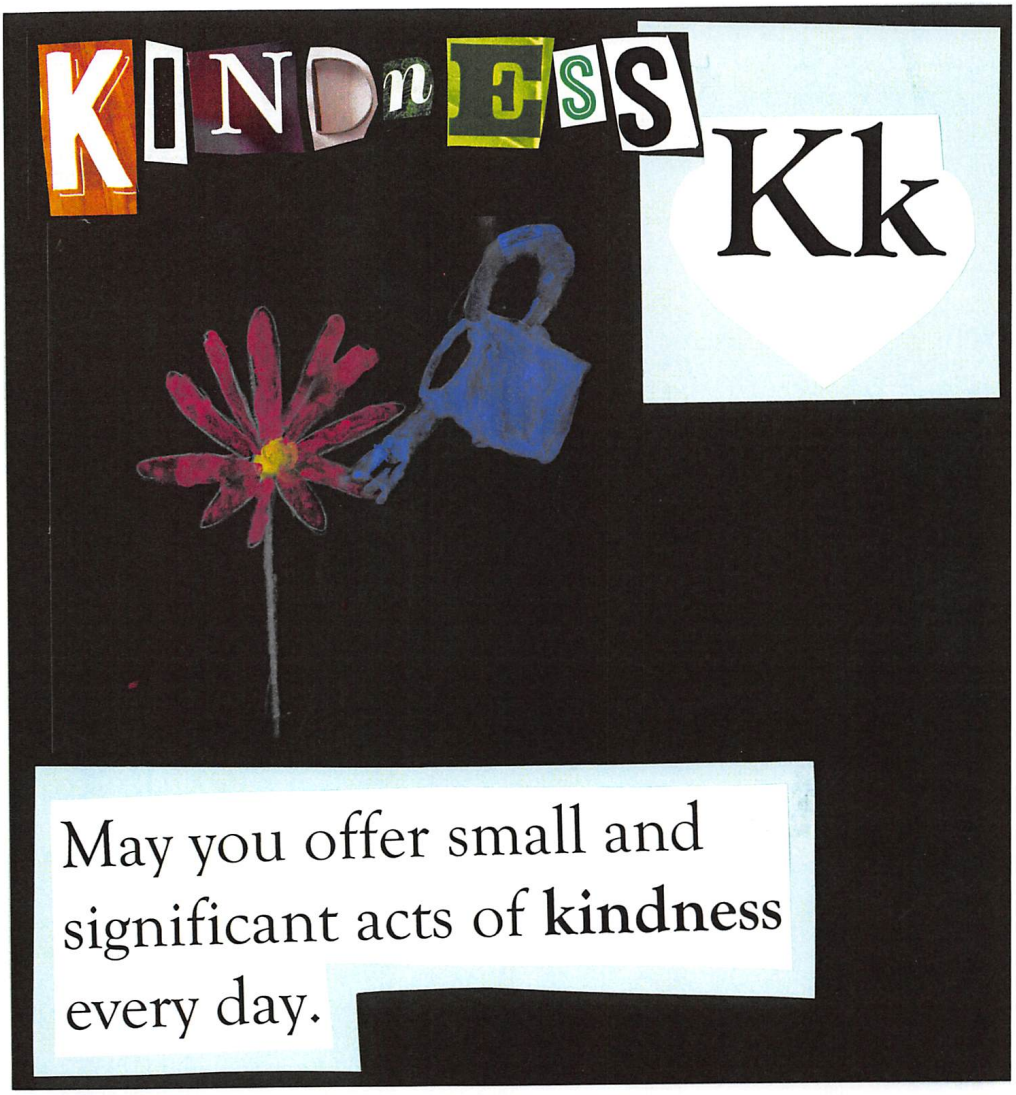
May you **find grace** in those who have forgotten they have it.


Gg
gentleNess
May you bring **gentleness** to the world.

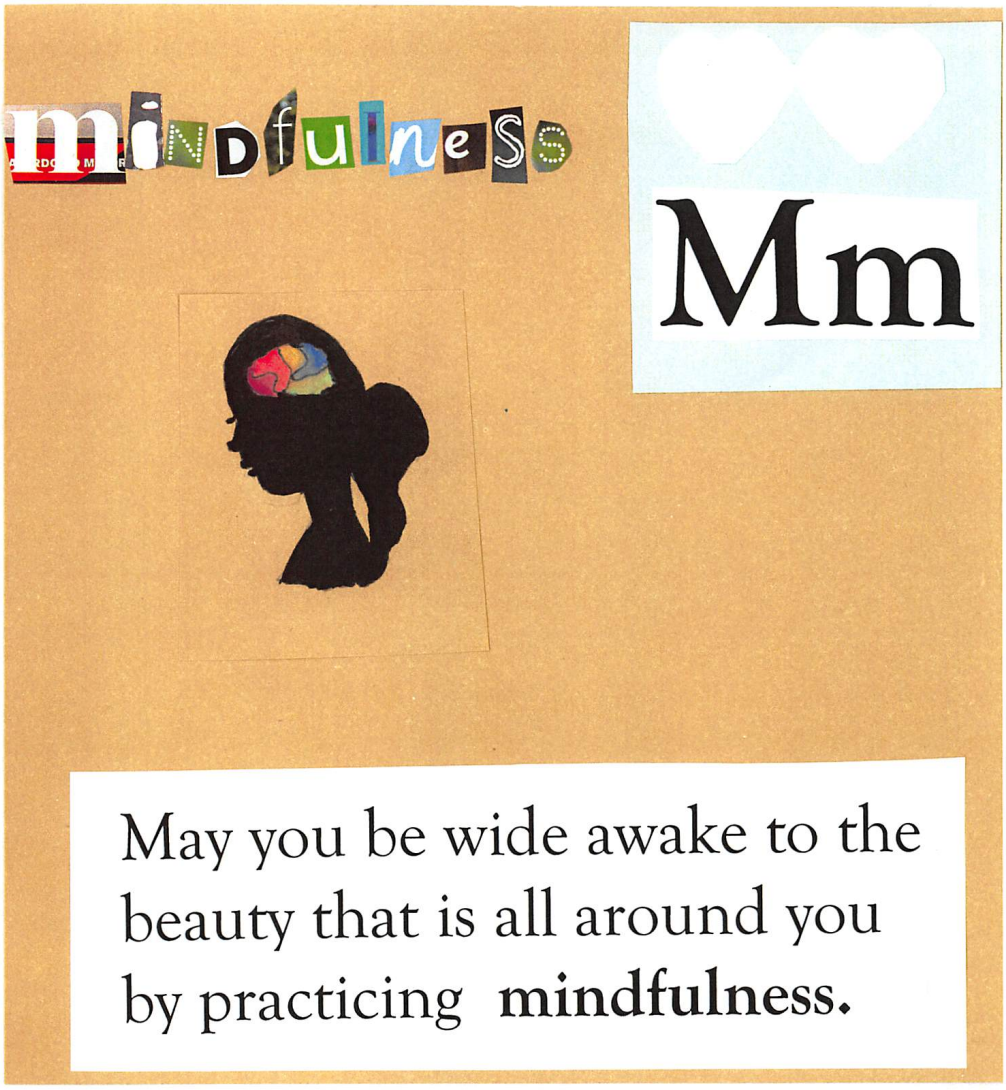

Hh
HOPE
May you hold on to **hope**
even in the darkest of times.

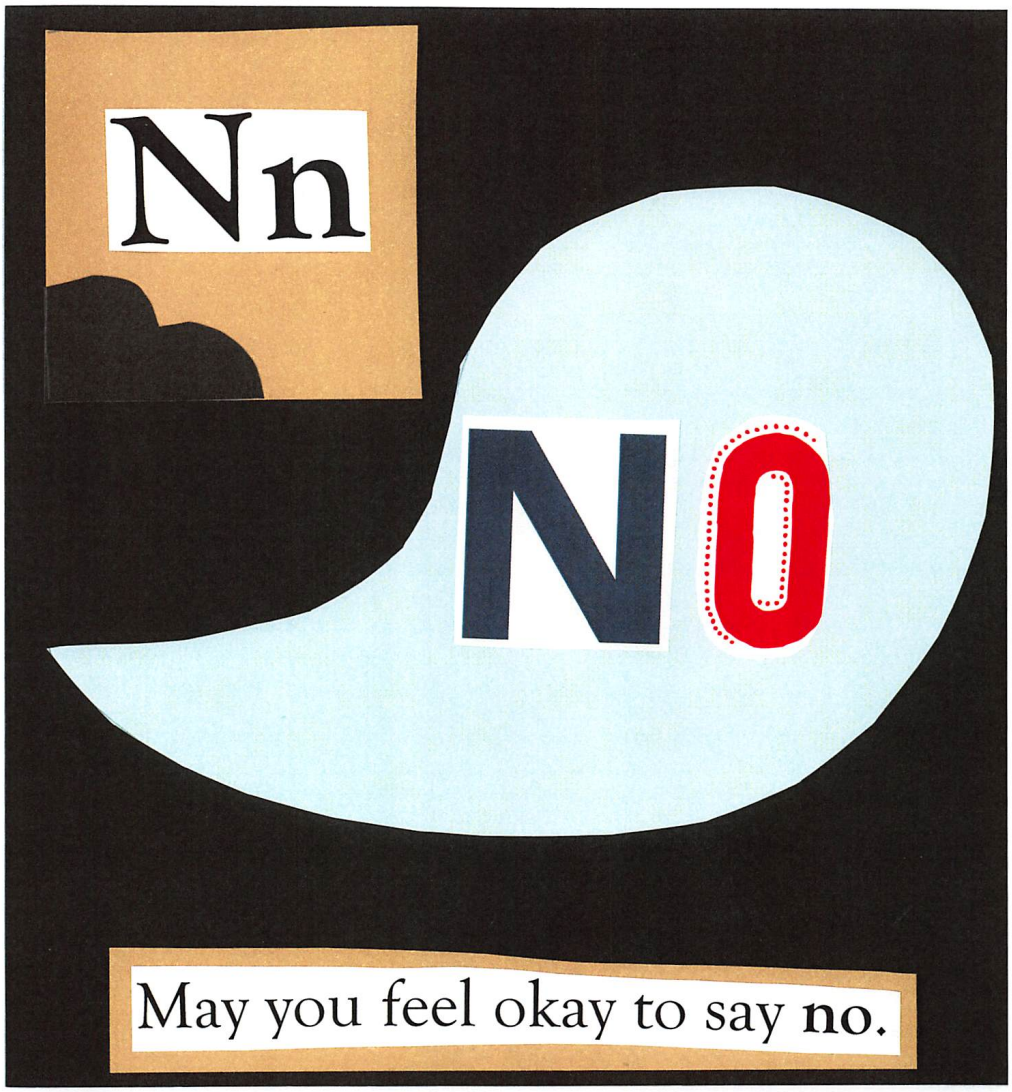

INQUIRY
Ii
May **inquiry** spiral you through curiosity and questions.

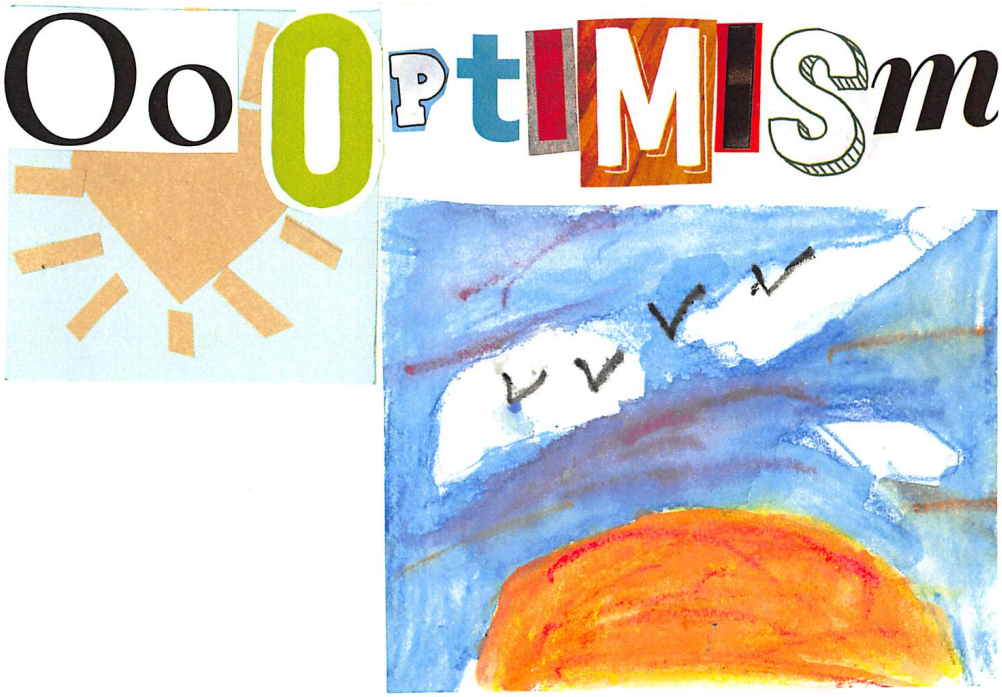

Jj
joy
May joy find you and you find joy.


KINDnESS
Kk
May you offer small and
significant acts of **kindness**
every day.

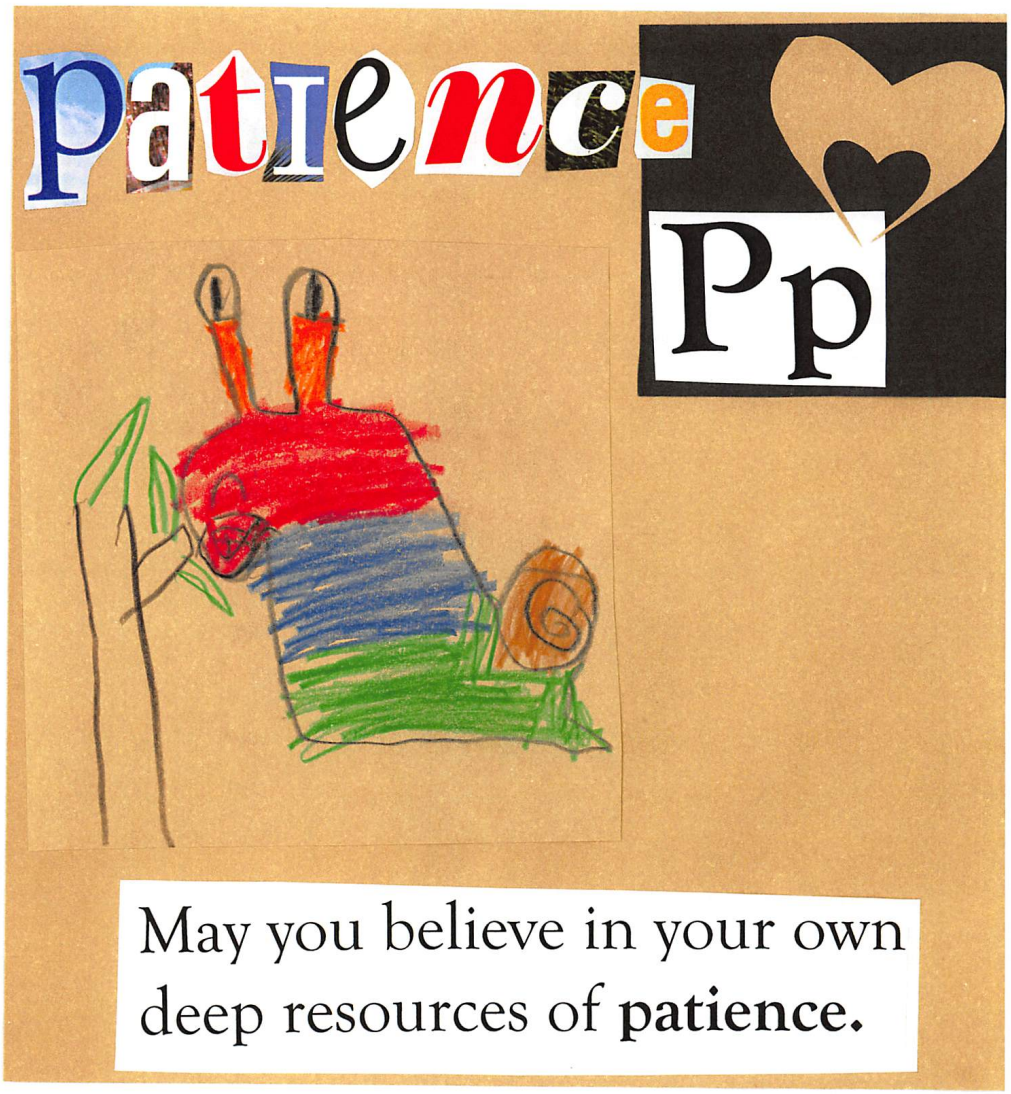
May you take time to **listen.**


mindfulness
Mm
May you be wide awake to the beauty that is all around you by practicing **mindfulness.**


Nn
NO
May you feel okay to say no.



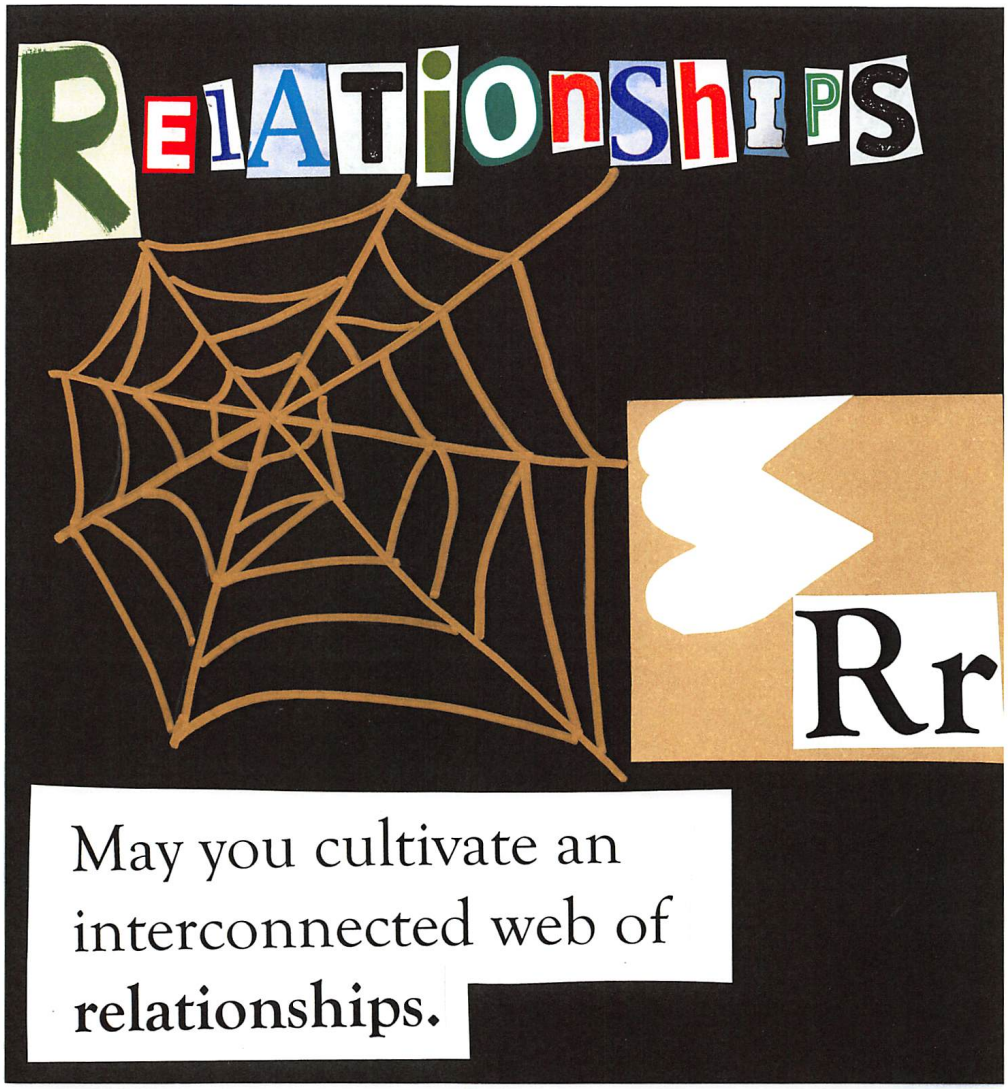
May you look for the best in all people and all situations, facing each day with renewed **optimism.**

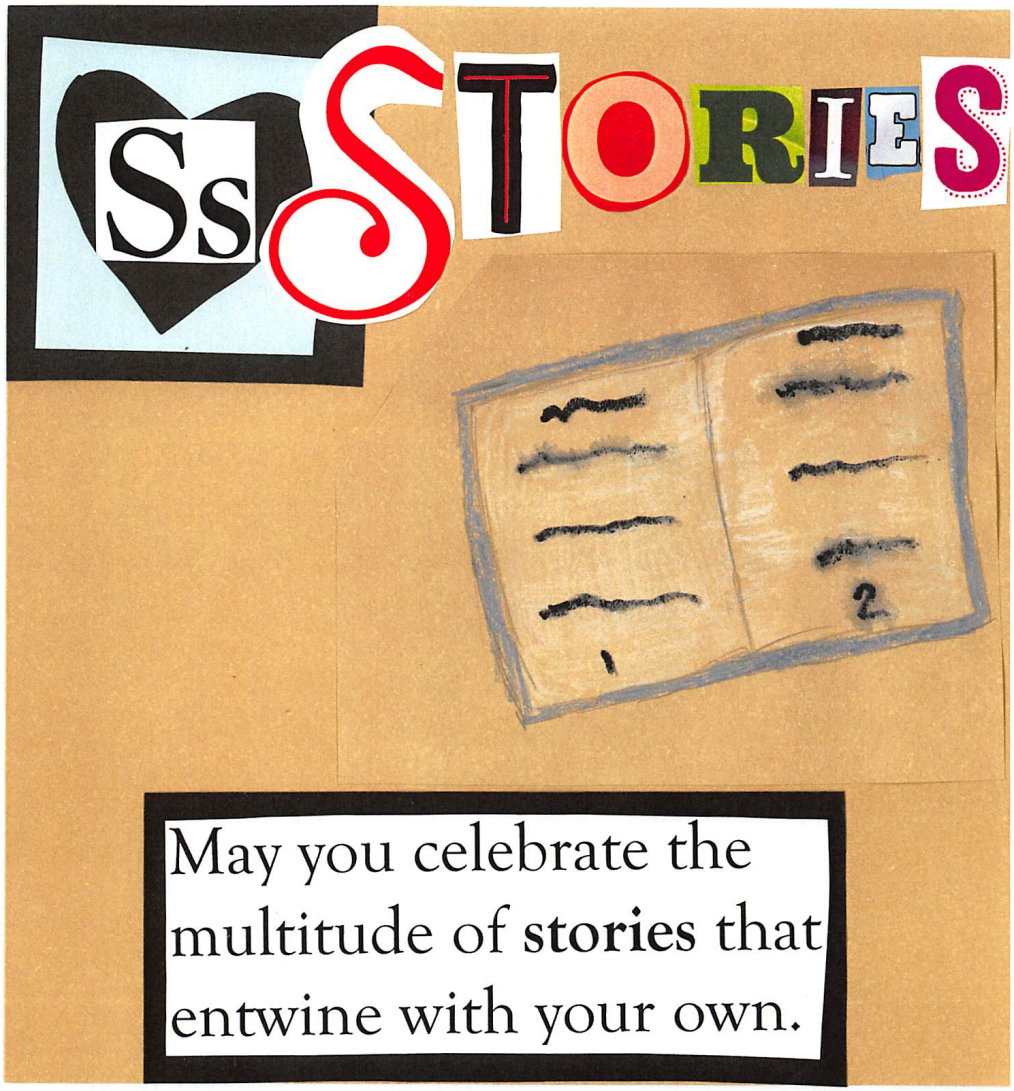

patience
Pp
May you believe in your own
deep resources of **patience.**

Qq

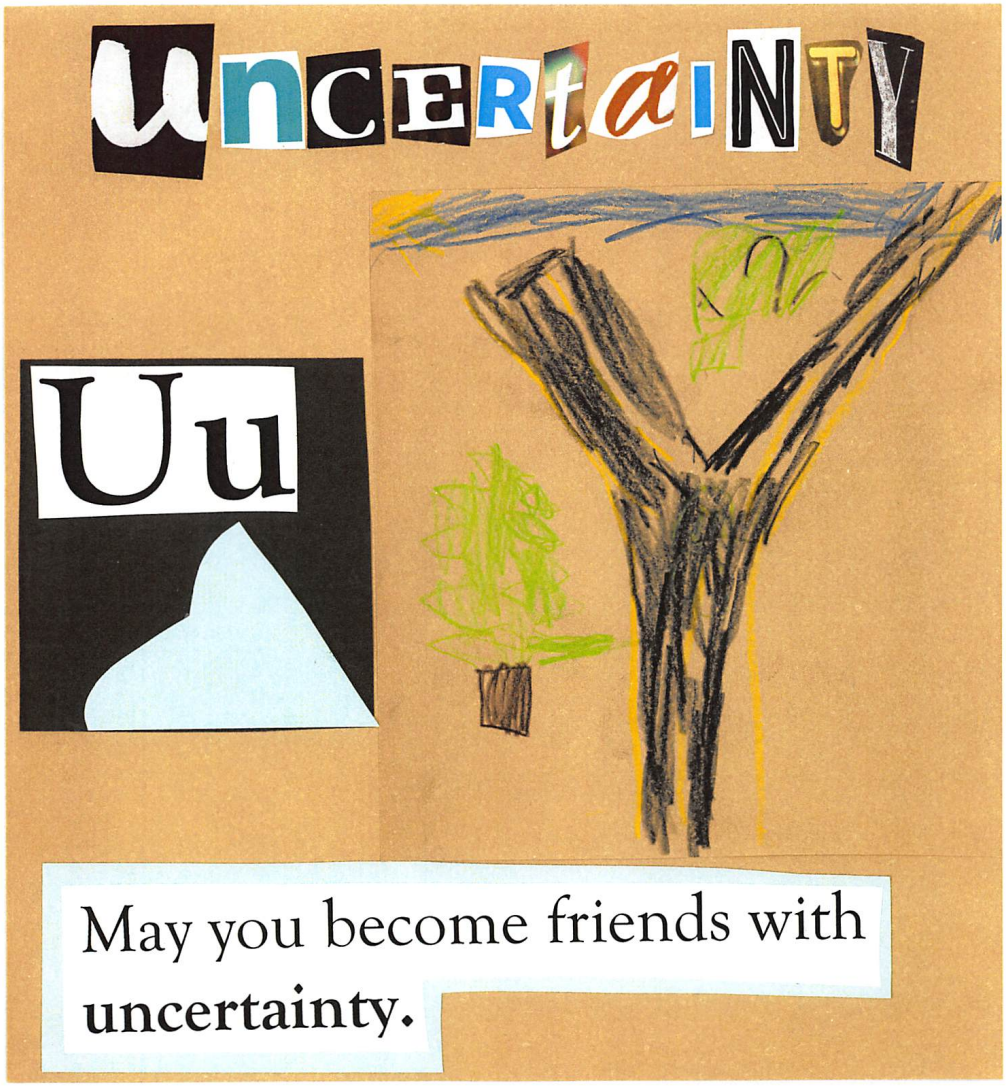
QUESTIONS

May you prompt genuine and excited **questions.**

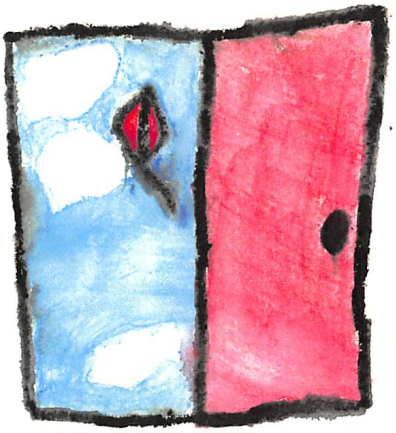

RelATiOnShIPS
Rr
May you cultivate an interconnected web of **relationships.**

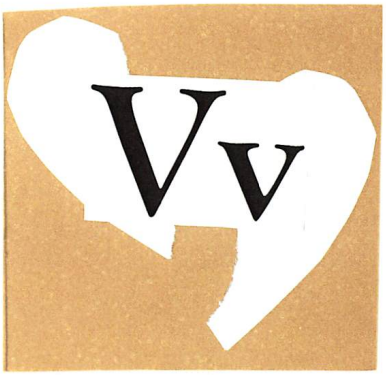

Ss
STORIES
1
2
May you celebrate the multitude of stories that entwine with your own.

May learning with you feel like **travels** into new worlds of adventure and understanding.

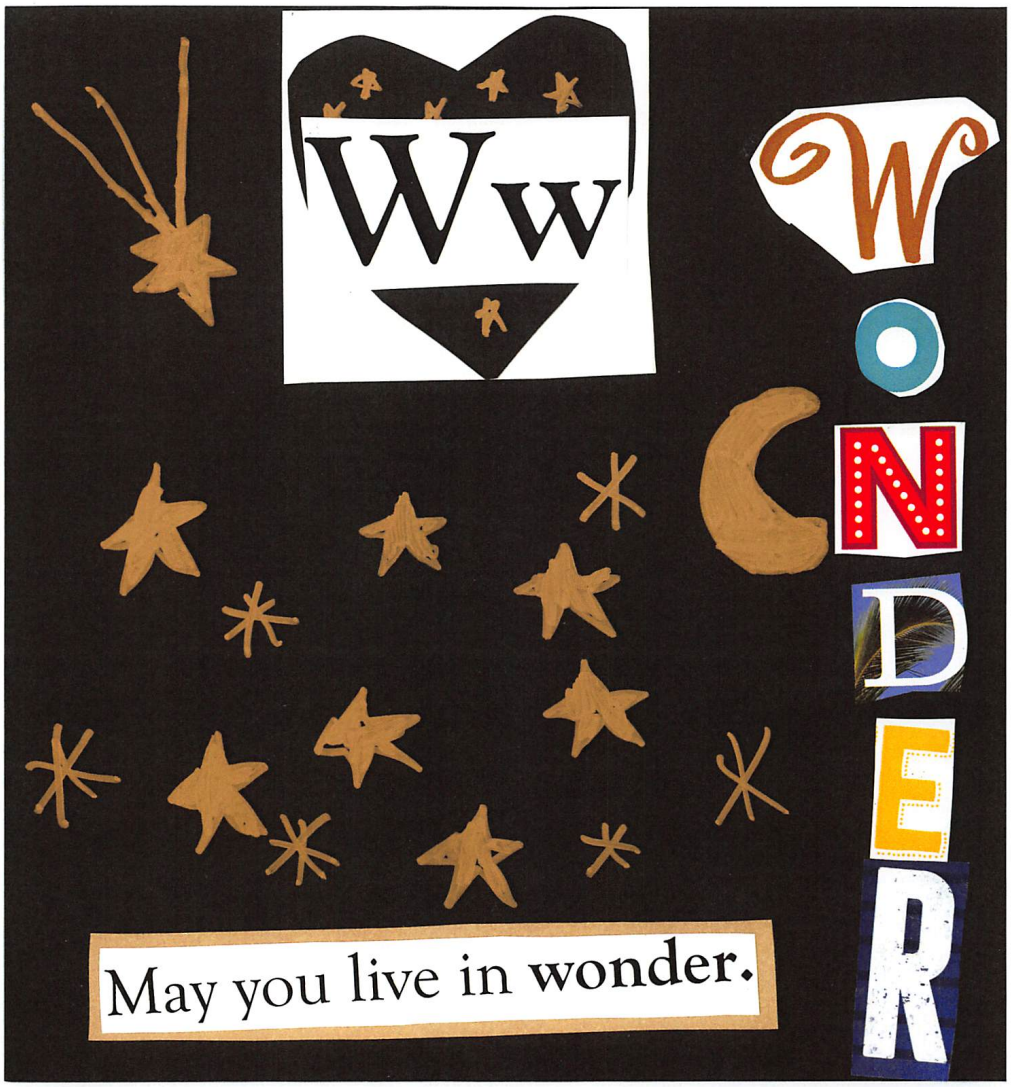

uncertainty
Uu
May you become friends with
uncertainty.

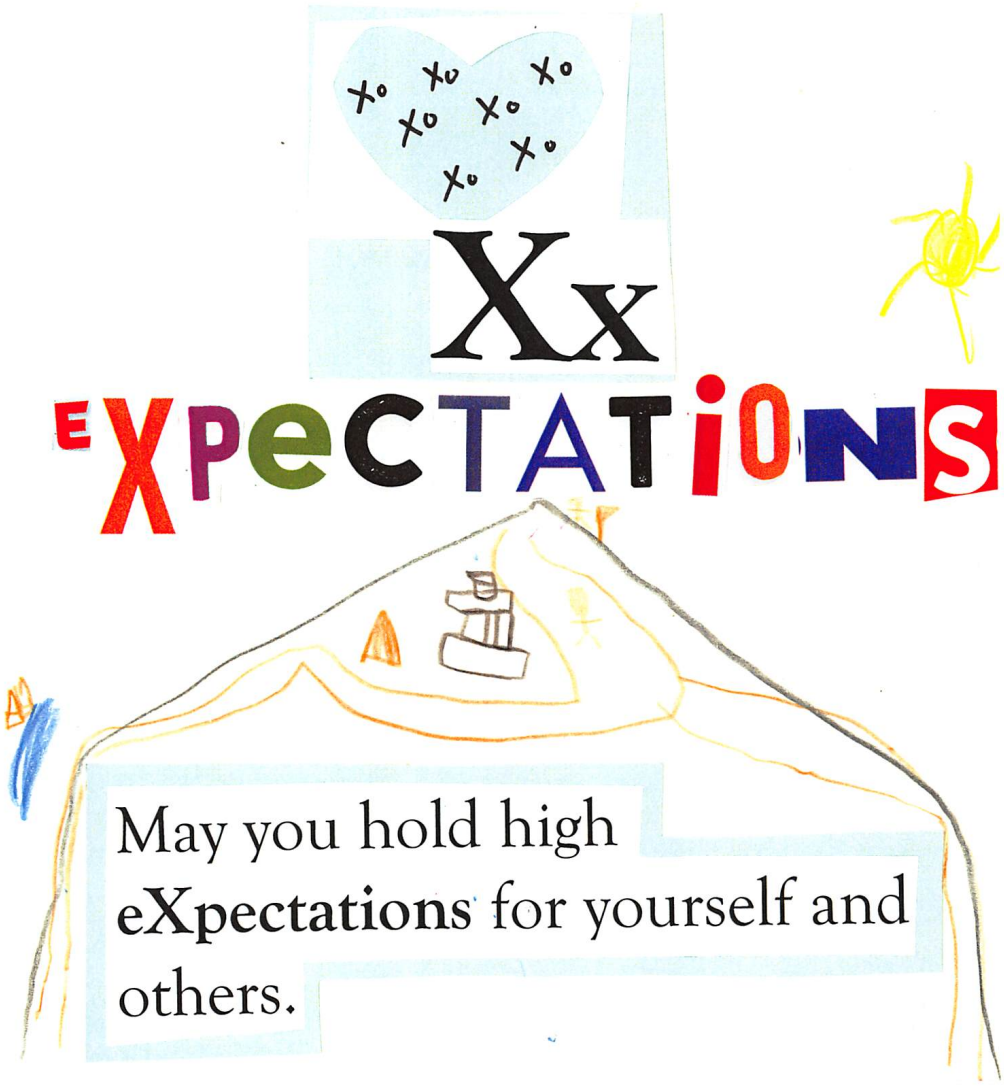
Vulnerability

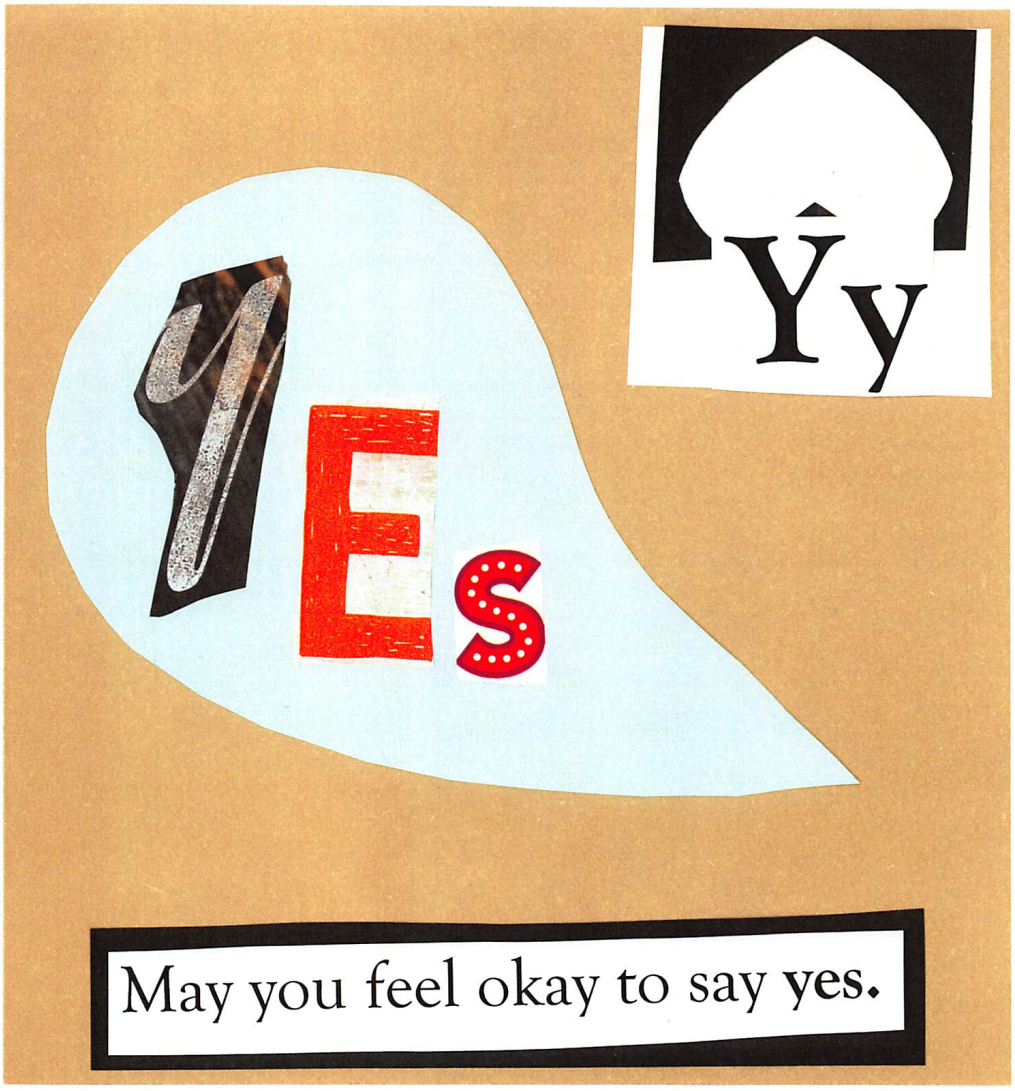


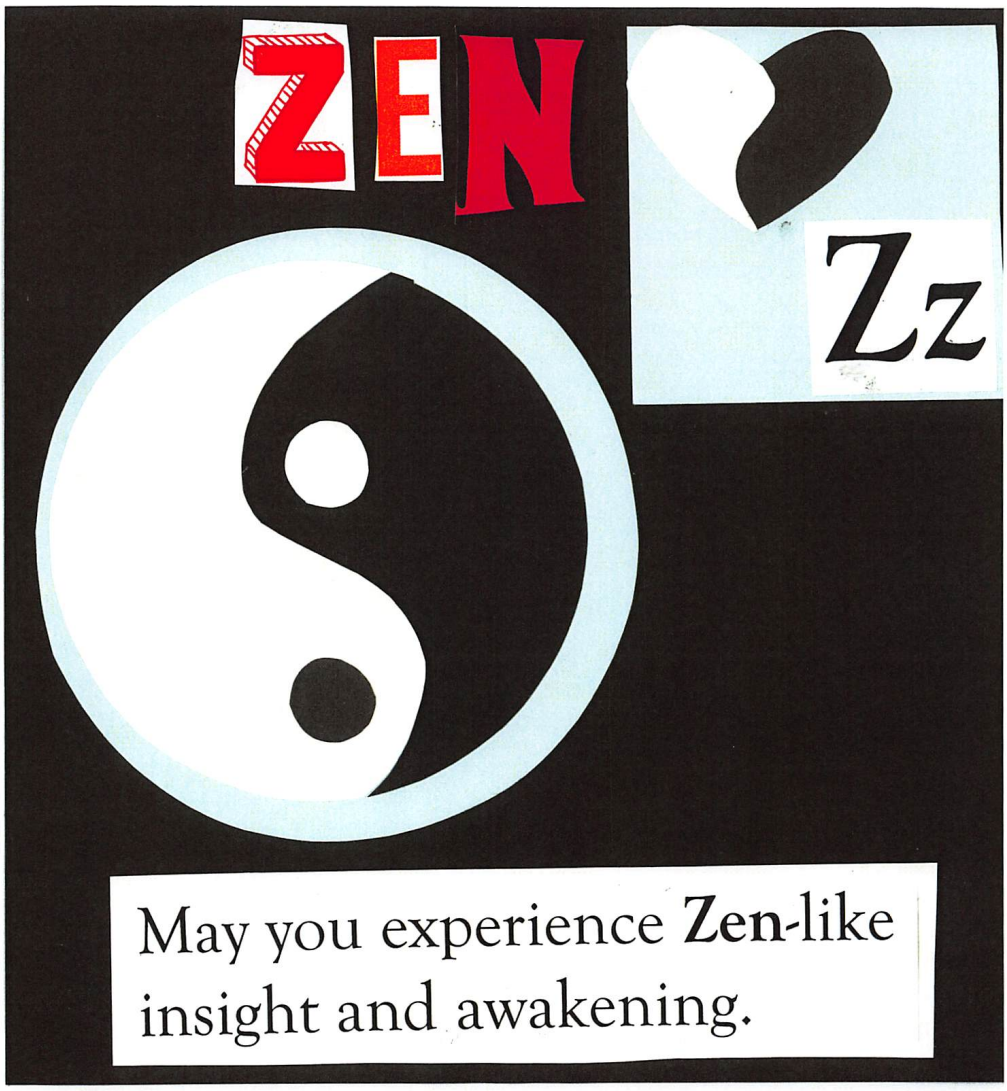


May you be brave enough to show your own **vulnerability.**


Ww
WONDER
May you live in wonder.


Xx
eXpeCTATiONS
May you hold high
eXpectations for yourself and
others.


Ŷy
yes
May you feel okay to say yes.


ZEN
Zz
May you experience Zen-like insight and awakening.

CHAPTER SIX
RSVP Life Writing and Life Reading

But I am convinced that reflective and impassioned teaching can do far more to excite and stimulate many sorts of young persons to reach beyond themselves, to create meanings, to look through wider and more informed perspectives at the actualities of their lived lives. (Greene, 1995, p. 172)

"So *why* does writing matter, again," they ask.
Because of the spirit, I say. Because of the heart. Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. (Lamott, 1994, p. 237)

Much of the beauty of light owes its existence to the dark. The most powerful moments of our lives happen when we string together the small flickers of light created by courage, compassion, and connection and see them shine in the darkness of our struggles. (Brown, 2012, p. 160)

What happens instead is that you've gone over something so many times, and you've weeded and pruned and re-written, and then the person who reads your work for you has given you some great suggestions that you have mostly taken—and then finally something inside you just says it's time to get on to the next thing. Of course, there will always be more than you could do, but you have to remember that perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor. (Lamott, 1994, p. 93)

I began this dissertation by inviting my readers and myself to start this inquiry into life writing and life reading just as we were, in the middle of all of our messy stuff, embracing our beginner's frame of mind. Throughout all the different forms, modes and genres of life writing that I braided into the literary métissage that has now become this dissertation, I feel like I have committed to this beginner's stance. Perhaps that is why a chapter that is technically an ending of this document seems somewhat difficult to write. One of my most significant personal learnings from working so intimately with life writing has been that I have discovered great understanding about my own writing process. I have become more aware of how I feel when I write, where I struggle, where I soar, when I rush, and when I resist. I resist endings. When I get close to a moment of "closure" in my writing, my inner censor seems to wake up and work over-time. I agonize over sentences, find any excuse to jump from my chair and become immersed in distractions, I read and re-read the writing that has come before—anything to avoid committing to an ending. So I usually have to trick or bribe myself to finish a piece. The bribe is usually a treat of some kind—a walk outside somewhere beautiful, a delicious ice cream, the promise of a weekend free of work and full of play with my family. The trick is usually finding a new way to frame the ending so it feels more like a beginning.

In more traditional dissertations I have read, the final chapter is often named something like "Findings." I imagine these chapters a bit like the authors are standing in the parking lot at the bottom of a challenging mountain trail, just about to jump back into their cars to head purposefully towards their next destinations. However, before they can go there, they must tell others in a succinct way about the trail up the mountain and back down. They must describe only the most important points of interest, direct attention to the most unusual findings, convince others about the significance of the journey, and persuade them that they should take

a similar trail of thought in the future. However, since I resist endings, I need to tweak the metaphor so it is more in line with my conceptualization of life writing and learning as *currere* (Pinar and Grumet, 1976)—a running of a course, a continuing journey, a series of arrivals and departures, a noticing of the path and not just the destination. So, if I re-imagine the same mountain path, but change my position on the trail, I feel more able to répondez, s'il vous plaît to my own work and to invite responses from others. So instead, I imagine myself at a resting point, somewhere near the crest of the trail, but not right at the top. I have chosen a place to rest, to pause, to catch my breath, to take in the panorama, and to gain new perspectives. I have come a long way. The trail was sometimes tough, I needed grit and determination to get where I am, but I am not done. There is still more of a climb and there will be a whole new trail to follow on my way down. I might end up following a circle trail back to my original starting point, or maybe a new trail will lead me to another place entirely. Either way is okay, but for now, I stop. I pause. I notice. I reflect.

In this beg-ending (nice little trick of combining a beginning and ending), I want to share two views from my current perspective that I think are particularly striking and significant for teaching and learning through vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness, and compassion. Then, in consideration of these two views, I ask myself three questions. First, I ask, *Why does life writing matter?* Second, I ask, *Who else might it matter for?* And finally, I ask, *Where do I go from here?*

A New View of My Teaching Practices

My intention when I began this process of life writing was to dig deeply into my own dynamic and, oftentimes, difficult teaching and learning processes, so that I might be more aware and equipped to help teacher education students and in-service teachers begin to

authentically and reflectively explore their own teaching and learning experiences. It is through my years of writing and rewriting, drawing and re-drawing, minding and re-minding that I am able to see that this dissertation never had as its purpose the goal of figuring out "the right way" to teach about homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, or any other social justice issue within teacher education. Instead, I intended to understand, acknowledge, accept, and illustrate my processes and my practices of teaching and learning during moments of crisis. Doing so through this life writing research project, I have changed and shifted in my pedagogical approaches as a teacher educator. Much of this dissertation has focused on looking back in order to work through teaching and learning incidents from my personal experiences. As I now begin to gaze forward, I think it is important to look anew at how my processes of teaching, particularly about gender and sexuality equity in schools, has both stayed the same and shifted because of my contemplative and reflective practices. I do so because I believe the most significant, most immediate, and most long-lasting contributions of this dissertation come within my interactions with pre- and in-service teachers. Where, how, and if I publish all or some of this dissertation seems less significant to me than where, how, and why I engage in practices and processes with teacher-learners in undergraduate, graduate, and professional development settings. My most likely and most significant place for dissemination of this research will happen within lived experiences and relationships with teachers and teacher education students. My hope is that these teaching and learning encounters where I explicitly share ideas for contemplatively and reflectively practicing vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness, and compassion will then have an impact on how those I teach interact with their students.

I have continued to teach about homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, and gender and sexuality equity in a variety of settings. In my undergraduate or post-undergraduate courses, I usually schedule this issue as a topic of study within the course outline and have required readings and/or viewings on the topic prior to the class. I have also been invited numerous times by colleagues to be a guest presenter in their graduate and/or undergraduate classes. There is a difference in how I approach teaching when I have a longer term, more established relationships with students over a term and how I approach teaching when I am asked to come into share either my research process or and/or my knowledge about LGBTQ* and ally issues in a one-off presentation setting. When I have a class that I know well and have had time to develop authentic relationships with over time, I am more able to be responsive, flexible, and specific in what I might focus upon during our class time together. In a class where I am arriving, making a presentation, and then leaving, I am more likely to have a more scripted and self-contained lesson plan. However, there are a lot of overlaps to my approach in either context.

Whether I am guest presenter or course instructor, my approach has shifted significantly since my first teaching encounter, mainly because I have more experience and I have invested an intense amount of time and energy into practitioner research that has helped me reflect upon my goals, role, and approach. I no longer think I am going to "do harm" when I teach about this subject. I have far greater comfort with the discomfort that this teaching and learning might provoke. On a very practical level, I know the material better, I have a stronger ethical conviction in what I am doing because I have a stronger theoretical foundation, and I have had wider experience of teaching this content with varied "audiences". Just as I have reassured my teacher education students, time and experience shifts our teaching practices. As we gain more

experiences, certain aspects of teaching become a bit easier, or at least a little less salient. We may no longer feel terrified every time we prepare and facilitate a lesson. We begin to know what resources and approaches have worked well for certain individuals in our past classes. We can put our mistakes, or unexpected moments, or our crisis experiences into different perspective. We can feel a little more comfortable in the dynamic, ever-changing, never predictable landscape of teaching. Our confidence, courage, and, hopefully, compassion grows. I find it much easier to keep calm and carry on then when I first taught about this issue as a new teacher educator.

A great deal of the content I teach to my classes or in my presentations has remained fairly consistent with my first teaching encounter—in fact, I still use many of the same slides from my original PowerPoint. I have learned I needed a rather significant pruning of content, so we could dig deeper and have more time for responses, but I still use a lot of the same resources. What I perceive as being different now is how I approach and set a tone for the content and the conversations that follow. I begin the class differently. I ground what we are about to do in the concepts of practising vulnerability and discomfort. I start the class or presentation now by talking about the transformative power of vulnerability and discomfort. Then I begin to tell stories. This is a shift from how I first taught about anti-homophobia education where I thought I needed to teach in a formal way—right from my most professional outfit to my very tightly designed lesson. However, storytelling is much more aligned with how I regularly teach. By engaging so fully in these life writing practices, I feel like I am much more able to approach my teaching from an authentic place and more whole-heartedly show up, willing to share my own struggles, questions, and experiences.

I begin by telling stories about why I started teaching about this issue the first time and how much the global and institutional conversations about gender and sexuality equity and rights have changed, yet also stayed the same, during the relatively short time I have been teaching about it. I talk about how everyone in the room is likely in a different space about how comfortable or uncomfortable they might be feeling about the topic, and I share how my discomfort has changed over time. I then tell them that this work has unexpectedly become my dissertation. In some form or another, I share some sort of short version of my first encounter teaching—including my very ungraceful tears in that first talking circle. Sometimes I use some of the modes of life writing I have produced for this dissertation to share the story. I might use a comic, read a poem, together we might read a section of the play, or I might perform a storytelling of the incident and my experiences working through it. I draw my students' attention to the fact that I now wear jeans when I teach this lesson, a practice I began a few years ago. I acknowledge the jeans are a new costume of sorts. However, I talk about how I now know that this teaching encounter will likely be somewhat discomforting, so I want to make sure that at least what I'm wearing is as comfortable as possible. I talk about how I want to bring my most real, most vulnerable self to the teaching experience. I let them know that while I am much more confident in my teaching than I was a few years prior, I still feel a little nervous about digging into this topic with students because I know it is an issue that can provoke strong emotional reactions and potential suffering. I let them know that the jeans are one small symbolic way I practise self-compassion during times of more intense teaching. I might not always continue to wear jeans when I teach (perhaps it is a bit gimmicky), but if I shift the practice of what I wear, then I will likely tell my students a story of how my "costume" has changed over the years and why.

I tell these stories, I wear my jeans, I share lots of quotes about discomfort and vulnerability because I want to ground what we do in our shared common vulnerability or our shared common suffering. I want to acknowledge and invite our vulnerability and discomfort, so we can work *with* it, rather than struggle *against* it. I have not done any studies on the efficacy of this approach, but I have experienced how students respond to my presentations. I believe I am more present—less caught up in my own suffering and more able to attend to my students. I find the conversations and questions are a little more open than the first few times I taught. I get students saying things like, "This might be super obvious to everyone else, but I've always wondered . . ." or "I'm really ashamed because this happened and I didn't do anything about it," or "I really struggle with this because of something happening in my family, or at work, or in my church." If or when things become more tense, I am able to point towards practices of mindfulness—I get people to notice how they are feeling or where their tension might be manifesting itself in their bodies. I also use a lot of language of compassion and self-compassion. I often have people who linger a little after class or the presentation and we talk through something they wanted to say to me in a more private setting. In terms of when I am a guest presenter, I often have feedback from the regular instructor of the class that the conversation continued after I left or the following weeks. In the class where I am an instructor, we often come back to the ideas or conversations in other discussions or students will tell me in person, by email, or on the course evaluation about circumstances where they were able to respond more thoughtfully when they heard or witnessed homophobia, transphobia, or biphobia.

My vulnerable side cringes a little when I write this, because I feel the discomfort that others may think that I am repeating a previous pattern of attempting to make myself sound like

a super hero—the teacher who has it all figured out and will save the day. I may have traded the cape for jeans, but I worry it still sounds like I am still justifying my choices as a teacher. My self-compassionate side can recognize the difference in how I feel about this telling and this teaching. As Jinpa (2015) writes:

> Self-compassion is encouraging—and when we are less afraid of our mistakes, we can more readily look them in the eye, learn what we can from them, and move on with our greater goals in mind. Self-compassion makes us more resilient in the face of challenges. And the understanding, acceptance, and sense of proportion as we relate to the world that self-compassion entails is a kind of wisdom in itself. (p. 41)

I am sharing what I do now—with all its imperfections and mistakes—with both self-compassion and compassion for others who want to embrace teaching through vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness, and compassion.

A New View of Practising Vulnerability, Discomfort, Mindfulness, and Compassion

When I began naming the roots of my braided mandala (see Chapter Five for the description), which became the strands that compose this dissertation, I identified how four on-going processes of practising vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness and compassion were essential to who I am as a teacher and as a human being. As I first began gathering examples of life writing that I thought illustrated my processes of practising these big ideas, I flowed between each concept rather fluidly. One piece seemed to connect more clearly to discomfort, while another seemed to help me think and write about mindfulness. Yet another gave me an example of vulnerability, whereas others felt more like compassion or self-compassion. During the early stages of braiding my literary métissage, I did not think the order in which I explored the various practices mattered. I imagined that perhaps the dissertation would be one in which

the reader could be invited to open at any chapter and begin reading in any order. I still hope the dissertation works, at least partially, in this way—that we can dig into whichever chapter, whichever practice we most need at the time and find meaning and a cohesive, yet fragmented, story within it. However, as I have worked and re-worked each section, I have come to see how the practices do work interdependently, even though they are distinct strands within themselves. Each practice is provoked, empowered, and rendered stronger and more beautiful by the constant braiding and movement back and forth between each. From this perspective, I can now see how the order in which I theorize each big idea of vulnerability, discomfort, mindfulness, and compassion contributes to teacher education because it shares a process for working through moments of crisis in teaching and learning.

Teachers who open themselves to practising vulnerability often find themselves needing to engage more frequently in practising discomfort, because teachers who are willing to put their "professional armour" (Brown, 2012) to the side are more likely to notice, feel, and engage with suffering. If these teachers are looking for ways to lean into the discomfort rather than turn away from it, fix it prematurely, or anaesthetize it, they can be encouraged to practise mindfulness and re-mindfulness, putting their own or others' suffering into perspective. This mindfulness contributes to awakening practices of compassion and self-compassion to work through and alleviate the suffering they are experiencing. I came to know the order and cycle of these practices matter through my own life writing. If I have done my job well in this dissertation, this process should seem fairly obvious to you as a reader by now. Yet, I think I was better able to see how the strands work together and contribute to cultivating a compassionate stance as a teacher because of the revision process. After receiving generous feedback from my supervisor and committee members, I spent more time writing and re-

writing. During this stage I was introduced to the work of Kristin Neff (2011) on self-compassion and Thupten Jinpa (2015) on cultivating compassion. As I dug deeper into their work, especially Jinpa's, I could see how the strands of my dissertation work together to ground compassion as the place from which we teach, learn, and live.

Jinpa (2015) argues that vulnerability is essential to receiving compassion and responding compassionately to ourselves and others:

> I celebrate the fact that, as humans, we are never quite free from the dictates of compassion. We were born at the mercy of someone's care. We grew up and survived into adulthood because we received care from others. Even at the height of our autonomy as adults, the presence or absence of others' affection powerfully defines our happiness or misery. This is human nature—we're vulnerable, and it's a good thing. A fearless heart embraces this fundamental truth of our human condition. We can develop the courage to see and be more compassionately in the world, to live our lives with our hearts open to the pain—and joy—of being human on this planet. (p. xxx)

When I began this life writing process, I was emerging from a time when I was highly dependent on the care of others for my survival and happiness. On one level, I had to practise vulnerability because of circumstance. When I stood in front of countless strangers, even though they were health care professionals, in a hospital gown, missing body parts that I once had, and lacking hair, I felt vulnerable. Yet vulnerability, on another level was a choice, because I chose to stay as open as possible to the experience of cancer and all that came with it. I could have put up more walls and defenses, but I tried to stay open. I can see how this has also been true of my teaching career. Sometimes I have felt profoundly vulnerable because of circumstances: being a new teacher, being a foreign teacher in an unknown system, working as

a teacher in challenging inner city schools, being a new sessional instructor within the teacher education context, and teaching about potentially controversial topics and advocating for social justice with students at all stages in my career. Yet through my teaching career, I have also made choices to embrace vulnerability. I have wanted to share my authentic self with my students—mistakes, tears, and failures included. I have attempted to be a caring teacher, but also to open myself to the caring that my students want to give to me. Jinpa writes, "While it makes us vulnerable in the sense of needing other people's care and kindness, it also gives us our ability to connect with others—their needs, their pain, and their joys. It is this caring instinct that helps us to connect with others at the most basic level" (pp. 25-26). I think it is important for teachers who are just beginning their careers and those who have been practising as teachers for longer to hear about vulnerability, so that they can more consciously respond to vulnerable circumstances and make choices about how vulnerable they are willing to be with others. I think new and seasoned teachers can benefit from hearing about both the strengths and struggles of practising vulnerability and how it can contribute to a more compassionate stance as a teacher.

Discomfort and suffering are part of teaching and learning, because as Jinpa (2015) reminds us, discomfort and suffering are part of "the fundamental truth of our human condition that not all pain can be fixed, and that there is a limit to what each of us can do in the face of suffering" (p. 57). Experiences of discomfort and suffering are not choices. We do not have the option of pre-ordering a teaching career with only blissful moments without any complications, hardships, or pain. Therefore it becomes how we engage with those difficult experiences, or how we practise discomfort that influences some of most important decisions we make about our own and others' wellbeing throughout our teaching careers. Jinpa teaches us:

> Our happiness lies not in avoiding pain and sorrow, but in not letting them disturb our basic equilibrium—the calm of allowing, at least for the moment, the way things are. The sooner we make peace with them, the sooner we can stop reacting and start living with compassion for ourselves and for others. I must admit that this is a difficult truth to accept, no matter how true it might be. Hopefully, when we see how much harder it is to fight it we can agree that acceptance, understanding, patience, and kindness—compassion—is worth the effort to try. (p. 62)

It is worth the effort to try to figure out how to bear being uncomfortable for a while (Kumashiro, 2010) and to lean into discomfort. Yet, as teachers and teacher education students we need to learn practices to do this so we can retain our resiliency and keep our current suffering within perspective of our shared human condition.

As a former Buddhist monk, it is not surprising that Jinpa (2015) advocates for contemplative and/or mindfulness practices as essential to cultivating compassion. However, he does not advocate for an exclusively Buddhist approach, but rather argues that contemplative practices can be grounded in a more inclusive secular stance. He suggests:

> We need some peace and quiet—not a weekend away in the country, necessarily, but the everyday ability to quiet and still the mind so that we can be free, at least for a chosen period of time, from the restless energy of thoughts and emotions that usually storm through it. We also need cognitive skills to intervene in our own thinking. We need to have focus in order to shift our attention from ourselves to others and the world around us. And we need some ability to pay attention to what the mind is doing so that we are not always at the mercy of it automatic habits. We cultivate these skills through contemplative practices. (p. 93)

He further instructs, “this skill of simply being present and observing our body, feelings, and its contents, without judgment or resistance, is really the core of modern mindfulness practice” (pp. 107-108). Through my life writing processes, which included the broadest sense of “writing” to include art making in a variety of modes, I discovered a way to practise both reflection on previous teaching and learning experiences and mindfulness of how I presently think and feel about those experiences. Art and writing allowed me to pay attention to what my mind was doing and to shift attention to the world around me. I am also able to engage in contemplative practices of sitting and walking meditations, intention setting, and connection to my breath. As I have actively engaged with these practices throughout my work with teacher education students since my return from my health leave, I have noticed that I am calmer, more centered, and more forgiving of myself as a teacher (at least more of the time than before I was teaching with these practices). I agree with what Jinpa writes about the connection between mindfulness and meta-awareness: “By strengthening our meta-awareness, we become more and more aware of others. We put ourselves in the courageous position of being with things as they actually are, since we know there’s a calm place within ourselves where we can stand” (p. 111). I try to model and explicitly teach these practices with my teacher education students. Since they are practices, we might as well invite new teachers to begin practising mindfulness from the very beginning of their careers. If we do so, these beginning teachers may cultivate the calm places within themselves that will allow them to respond more kindly and wisely to their students.

Engaging in this life writing process has helped me identify the goal of cultivating compassion, both for myself and for others, as central to my life work as a learner, teacher, and human being. Jinpa (2015) argues that “the goal of cultivating compassion is both ambitious

and radical. It is to transform our very being, and profoundly change how we behave in the world" (p. 213). I appreciate how Jinpa advocates that practising compassion is a needed element of working for social justice:

> Logically, anyone who is dedicated to compassion will also be commited to social change, not just personal transformation. People who work to promote social justice, respect for human rights, and greater democracy around the world are champions of compassion in action. (p. 232)

Practising compassion as a teacher means that we dive into the difficult, talk about the hard stuff with our students, and do something to make changes for the better at local and global levels. Being a champion of compassion in action does not mean we have to adopt a super hero stance. In fact, Jinpa argues that "compassion isn't heroic, it's human. When we look we can always find opportunities to express kindness in our everyday life" (p. 233) He then says, "The question is not whether I am compassionate; rather the question is: Will I make the choice to express the most compassionate part of me?" (p. 233) This has become a central question for me: Will I make the choice to express the most compassionate part of me when I teach, learn, and live? If I make that choice, then how can I put into place practices that help support me cultivating and responding with compassion for myself and others? This is where the ending of this life writing project becomes a invitation to a new beginning of a compassionate living project.

Why Does Life Writing Matter?

Life writing matters because it invites teachers and learners to show themselves in process. Life writers have been encouraged to ask: "*What moments of learning/teaching have changed your life? What stories need to be told? What questions need to be asked?"*

(Chambers et al., p. xxi, italics in the original). These questions provoke us to dig deep into our lives and integrate otherwise untold or unexplored stories into our life projects as teachers. Greene (2001) writes:

> Teachers have their own crafts, their own repertoires, their own modes of artistry. You also have a life project, a way of being in the world through which and by means of which you define yourself as a person. That project is teaching, and if you are like me, it is a lifelong quest, a lifelong project. Like the artists, we are always in process, always exploring our texts, our raw materials, always seeking ways of reaching others and moving others to come alive, to think about their thinking, to create meanings, to transform their lived worlds. What happens here, I think, what ought to happen is not simply a planning for the school year, not simply pondering new curricula (important though all this is). There is something else: a reaching out on our part, an authentic reaching out to become different. I mean different in the sense of having more languages at hand for expressing what it is you have to say. I mean different in the sense of knowing what it is you have to say. I mean different in the sense of knowing what it is to let your imagination play, to look at things as if they could be otherwise, to open windows in the ordinary and banal. (p. 70)

The life long quest, practice, and project of life writing helps teachers, at whatever stage we are at in our careers, to reach out to become different more compassionate. Practising life writing equips us with more languages to express ourselves, a stronger sense of knowing what we need to say, and a lived appreciation of a playful imagination, a willingness to look anew, and a commitment to find the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Life writing matters because it offers concrete ways to practise mindfulness, reflection, and reflexivity as a teacher, which, in turn, invites a more awakened, critical, and compassionate stance as an educator. Critical literacy scholars and teacher educators, Vasquez, Tate, and Harste's (2013) goal is for pre- and in-service teachers to "be able to participate differently in the world and to make the most informed decisions they could possibly make about important social issues" (p. 3). They argue that, "while a teacher's practice is important, teachers are more likely to affect their students' lives when they have a deep understanding of why they do what they do" (p. 34). To engage teachers in the why of their practices, Vasquez, Tate and Harste suggest a critical literacy approach where as a teacher one is engaged in "examining one's own assumptions, values, and beliefs" and "understanding the position(s) from which we speak, the position(s) from which we teach and the Discourses (ways of being, doing, acting, talking and thinking) that shape those positionings" (p. 23). They argue that these intense processes can lead to a teacher's self-actualization:

> According to hooks (1994), teachers who are self-actualized are able to teach in a manner that empowers students and moves beyond the boundaries of compartmentalized bits of knowledge and narrowed perspectives. hooks (1994) believes that teaching can become a career that engages not only the student, but the teacher as well. (p. 30)

Continuing to draw upon hooks (1994), they state, "the self-actualized teacher connects who they are to the lives of their students and they understand what they teach is deeply connected to who they are" (p. 23). By taking the time and space to know ourselves, to examine who we are, and where we come from, teachers are able to model for our students the process of self-actualization.

I believe life writing offers teachers worked examples (Gee, 2010) of reflective and reflexive practices. Worked examples (Gee, 2010) are "attempts to imagine exemplars for a new area, and ways to create collaboration and debate around such proposed exemplars, in service of hastening actual exemplars and the growth of the area" (p. 49). If as teacher educators we want to move beyond simply promoting the importance of reflective practice, self-examination, and self-actualization, then we need to show more teachers (and teacher educators) the messy process of doing so. These processes are unique to each individual teacher, but reading life writing—especially when it comes from a wide variety of perspectives or is presented in a range of modes and genres—is a starting point for other teachers to imagine how they could, or already do, engage in a similar process for themselves. As I have engaged in my own life writing practices, I have become more open to how different modes create different affordances of meaning. It was through practising drawing, collage making, poetry, or comic making that I was able to make connections between different experiences that I do not think I would have otherwise connected. Consequently, over the years I have been working in these modes for my own growth as a teacher, I have been encouraging the teacher education students I work with to play in more arts-based, less exclusively traditional academic forms of meaning-making. I share some of my worked examples of how I try to figure out why I am the teacher I am. When a teacher education student takes the risk to create one of his or her course assignments in the form of a digital photo story, comic, song, script, visual art piece, or whatever moves them, I understand both the complexity of the skills and thinking required to do so, and I appreciate how working in this new mode may help them discover startling new insights. Life writing as teachers matters because it inspires our students' life writing and contemplative practices.

Who Else Might it Matter For?

Teacher Educators and Teacher Education Students

Life writing as a mode of educational inquiry has already been established as a way for teacher educators and teacher education students to connect to "practices of wisdom traditions where through the deep work of paying attention to particular places and events, the practitioner may be rewarded with a 'heart of wisdom' (Myerhoff, as cited in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), a greater understanding of others, and self, in relation to others" (Chambers, Leggo, Hasebe-Ludt & Sinner, 2012, p.xxi). However, I believe life writing is complicated work that can sometimes be dismissed as self-indulgent or deemed not the top priority in teacher education curricula where there are many competing needs and interests. In a short time frame, teacher education students are expected to co-construct confident teacher identities as teachers and prepare to teach in complex and unpredictable contexts. Selwyn (2010) suggests "that one of the most fundamentally important acts in a teacher's preparation is to become clear about what he or she values and wants for the students. The most fundamental questions one can ask as a teacher are: Who are my students? What do I want for them? What are my goals? What is most important, what matters?" (p. 34) I believe life writing can help teacher education students to ask those questions about their future students, by first exploring their own teaching and learning stories. Vasquez, Harste, and Tate (2013) argue:

> It requires understanding by unpacking your own biases and your own privileges. We must begin to critically assess who we are as educators, what we believe, and how that unfolds within or classrooms and personal lives. One way to do this is through the use of biographical narratives that help us to unpack our buried histories and experiences or those histories we sometimes unknowingly overlook. (p. 99)

If teacher education students are given time and space in their professional programs to engage in unpacking their personal histories through practices like life writing, they may be more likely to continue such processes throughout the careers. I believe more teacher educators need to engage in and share these critical, reflective, and compassionate life writing practices with their students.

LGBTQ* Educators, Researchers, Advocates, and Allies

There has been a significant shift in the global conversation about LGBTQ* rights since I first taught about anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia education with teacher candidates just over four years ago. Although there has been more public discourse and policy making dedicated to creating safer, more welcoming, and equitable spaces for teachers, students, and families on all parts of gender and sexuality spectrums, a great deal more attention and advocacy is required to make systemic societal change. I believe contributing the stories of my struggles and practices of making meaning as an ally and teacher educator will add another perspective to an issue that requires multiple voices, including much needed voices of compassion. I also believe the voice of an ally teacher educator working in the context of the Canadian prairies, and not just in the larger urban areas, also might matter to teachers and students who are advocating for change in their local contexts.

Wellbeing, Mindfulness, and Compassion Practitioners and Teachers

As I discuss in Chapter Four, I have only barely begun to dip my toes into the vast ocean of knowledge and animated conversations about mindfulness, wellbeing, and compassion. This is an area in which I would like to become better acquainted and in which I believe my work matters. I believe my life writing would find a place to contribute lived examples of a practitioner's process in trying to cultivate mindfulness, wellbeing, and compassion in

teaching, learning, and life. I am particularly interested in further exploring the connections between aesthetic education theory, arts-based methodologies and practices, and mindfulness and compassion cultivation. I am deeply interested in how we might design more opportunities for children and youth to encounter and participate in the arts—visual arts, digital arts, drama, creative writing, and so on—with an intention of introducing these experiences as practices of mindfulness, wellbeing, and compassion. I believe that in order for any student-focused arts, mindfulness, and compassion initiatives to be sustainable and integrated throughout school experiences, we need to offer similar opportunities for teachers to continue to be awakened and inspired by the arts. I have long been inspired by Maxine Greene's life project, which she dedicated to inspire teachers and give them firsthand experiences encountering and participating in the arts, especially in the summer institutes offered at the Lincoln Center Institute of the Arts. I would like to be part of a community of local educators, artists, writers, and mindfulness practitioners who work towards creating more opportunities for teachers and students to cultivate compassion and engage in wellbeing and well-becoming in our province.

Cancer Survivors and Medical Professionals

I also think parts of this dissertation matters to cancer survivors and medical professionals who work with cancer patients. Although nursing and medical research is not an area of familiar scholarship to me at this time, I believe that there may be a place to integrate the compassionate and self-compassionate survivor's voice and story within the ongoing conversations about treatment, patient care, and life beyond cancer. Many of the pieces of life writing I have included in this dissertation tell a firsthand account of a young cancer survivor. I articulate my worries and describe my strategies for making meaning and finding peace within my cancer journey. My four-strand braid of practices might provide insight, evidence, or

support for current or imagined programming for patients' wellbeing throughout their cancer journeys.

Where Do I Go From Here?

As I wrote in my poem "A Lately Realization" (see Chapter 5), "I'm used to living (or getting used to living) in the/ Here and Now (because my tomorrows are always changing)." In my current "Here and Now" I am completing the process of writing, revising, defending, and eventually disseminating my dissertation. I am asked a lot, "So what now? Where do you go from here?" My most honest answer is probably deeply dissatisfying to anyone who has posed the question: I am not certain what is next, or where I will go from here, or what I will do with all of this. Just like that poet-teacher of over ten years ago, I recognize my tomorrows are always changing and so too are my priorities and opportunities. Despite my reluctance to give any definitive answers (perhaps this is just another example of me resisting endings), I will try to give a more satisfying response that includes some of my best guesses of where I might go from here based on what I have discovered matters most to me.

Where do I go from here? I go back to the places and spaces and people that make me feel like my best, most awakened, most contributing to a compassionate life project self. I go back to classrooms where I work closely supporting teacher education students in their beginning journeys into teaching. I find places to contribute to professional learning and development with in-service teachers—whether this is through teaching university offered courses and summer institutes, or contributing to the provincial professional development offerings, or working alongside teachers and their students to support their writing and multimodal meaning-making within their classroom spaces. I find ways to co-create more arts, mindfulness, and compassion opportunities for teachers and students. I most definitely believe

that teaching is my "lifelong quest, lifelong project" and that I will "always be in process" (Greene, 2001, p. 70). I believe my most likely and most powerful way to disseminate my teacher research will be when I work, think, play, laugh, listen, read, write, and grow with other pre- and in-service teachers.

Where else do I go from here? I go back to other places and spaces and practices that make me feel like my best, most awakened, most compassionate self. I go back to the page. I keep life writing and life reading. I keep playing in multiple modes and voices within the arts so I can continue to ask generative what if questions and so I can bear whatever uncertainties and discomforts that inevitably come my way. Nelson (1994) beautifully articulates my best hope for myself:

> Here is what I hope you get from this . . . Ten years from now, I hope you will be sitting up some night at midnight under the light at the kitchen table—writing. Not because you have a paper due the next day or because someone has give you an "assignment"—but because you are hurting or grieving or confused, or because you are collecting some of the small joys of your day, or because you need to let go of some anger. Whatever the reason, you'll be sitting there at the table writing because you are a writer. My wish is for you to be a lifelong writer. My hope is that writing will be a tool—an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual tool—to help you survive and grow and find meaning and purpose and peace in your life. (p. 13)

Where am I going? I am not certain. But here I am. Writing, teaching, learning, living. Still grateful to be in all the messy stuff. Ready to start again, just as I am.

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