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The Meaning of Stories Without Meaning: A Post-Holocaust Experiment

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by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation work to my loving and supportive family. My beautiful intelligent daughter, Kya, who laughed, cried, and grew with me along the way. To my three extraordinary sons, Kelly, who snuggles me after every late night, Noah who will always be my little shadow, and Keagen who always makes me laugh. My husband, Jon, my father Bill Chambers, and my mother Maureen Chambers, for their love and confidence.

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ABSTRACT

Dissonance exists in efforts to communicate about suffering and despair. Showcasing common societal flawed reactions to despair begs for discourse to create a more communicatively healthy response. Attempting to communicate the suffering of others and feeling like I was failing at that goal led to my own suffering. Using writing as a method of personal healing created an intersection of personal narratives of suffering and victim's narratives (which can arguable only allow for the co-opting of the story and narcissism). Grappling with the limits of writing to heal provided a lens to see the victim's narratives in such a way that created self-reflexivity. Rather than equating the suffering of the victim's to my own, which I absolutely do not do, instead I found potential answers to despair in the post-Holocaust theologians. This dissertation is an experiment in trying to communicate suffering and meaning in a post-Holocaust world where my story and the survivors stories both have similarities of theological despair, an ethic of defiance, and most certainly a refusal to be changed by the world.

CHAPTER ONE
IDENTITY BARRIERS: (DE)CENTERING MY COMMUNICATION

The Problem of Despair and Communication

"After Auschwitz, there is no faith so whole as a faith shattered – and re-fused – in the ovens" (Greenberg, 1977, p. 317).

An intimate relationship exists between a tattoo artist and a client. With one sketch, one stencil, you entrust that artist to draw on your body…permanently. Tattoo clients have a variety of reasons they get ink. A skull, a rose, a naked woman, a child's footprint, a tribal band; they all have a story. The following is one of mine.

December 10, 2011

"Hey Dan," I say walking up to the counter. Flash art covers the walls of the tattoo shop. Resembling dental hygienists' chairs, three of the four seats stand empty on the left side of the store. At the station in the middle a young man, maybe twenty, sits staring over the tattoo artist's hand watching the ink etched into his skin. The scent of rubbing alcohol is strong, almost sweet, accosting my nose adding to the intense rippling in my stomach. Even though the shop is cool, a sweat has broken out over my body, yet I find myself rubbing at my arms. I consciously force myself to quit fidgeting.

"Hey! So, what are we looking at doing this time?" Dan asks with a grin. Dan has been my tattoo artist for 10 years, or four tattoos. Coming across as young, standoffish, and dismissive, Dan takes his work very seriously. He also cares about the product he is creating, if you, as the client, do. While he will do the hanging "flash art" on the walls, usually selected by someone drunk or on a dare, he would prefer to do more challenging original art. I trust Dan, yet it is with trepidation that I respond.

"Do you have internet access?"

"Yeah," he replies looking at me a little strangely, "hang on, let me grab my laptop."

Any second my chest will split wide open my heart is pounding so hard. Feeling like there is glue in my mouth, my stomach has gone from rippling to gnashing in on itself. My skin is prickling and I realize I am fidgeting again. Placing both my hands on the counter in front of me I begin breathing slowly, each breath reminding myself 'in through your nose, out through your mouth.'

"Here you go," Dan says placing the laptop on the counter facing me with the internet open.

"I want words on my inner forearm," I say as I pull up a video.

"Ok."

"From here," I point to the crook of my elbow, "to here," I point to where my wrist meets my hand.

He whistles, "Are you sure about that?"

I nod and turn my attention back to the computer, fast forwarding to the correct scene from the video for Pink's song "Perfect." At 2 min 49 sec, I pause it.

"I want two lines; the top will say Tikkun Olam. The bottom will say the same in Hebrew. I want the top line to look like this," I push the computer around to face him, my breathing stops, I wait. His face contorts as he stares at the girl in the tub with the word PERFECT carved into her forearm by a razor blade, blood streaked down the tub wall coloring the water pink.

"Oh my God, that's fucking disgusting! Dude, come here you have to see this," he yells across the shop to the other artist.

The guy saunters over and says, "That's fucked up man."

"What do you want it to look like that for? That's fucking awful," Dan says.

My stomach, now at an all-out boil, is rising into my chest, the bile gathering in my throat. I try to swallow, but there is no saliva in my mouth.

"I want the top line to look like it was carved into my arm with a straight razor," I say quietly, reminding myself 'in through your nose, out through your mouth,' as I am slammed with the memory of one week earlier.

One Week Earlier
December 2, 2011

"You're so mean

when you talk

About yourself, you were wrong

Change the voices in your head

Make them like you instead

So complicated

Look how we all make it

Filled with so much hatred

Such a tired game

It's enough

I've done all I can think of

Chased down all my demons…

("F**kin' [*sic*] Perfect," Pink, 2010, qtd from elyricsworld.com as cited in Bibliography).

Holding the straight razor I close my eyes. As her voice washes over me, even without the accompaniment of the video I still visualize the drop of blood splash into the water, watching as the girl presses the razor deeper into her flesh. At the pause in the song in my mind I see the blood splash as the razor hits the floor and see the image of the word PERFECT carved into the girl's arm. As the song begins again my hand holding the razor slumps to my side. Sitting on the floor of the shower stall my shoulders shake as I sob. The water stings the skin on my back as I slump down and dry heave toward the drain. I lean my back against the wall and feel the water pour over my face mixing with my tears. I hold my left arm out in front of me. Softly sliding my right fingers across the fleshy inside of my left forearm I can almost feel the gouges the razor would have made in the skin that would have permanently reminded me, spelling out SORRY. My reminder that I am unable, incapable, of changing anything, for myself let alone anyone else.

****

March, 2010

"Why do we continue to believe in God?" I ask my Jewish colleague and friend, who has been interviewing Holocaust survivors in the same project as I have over the last year. "How do we continue to believe in a God that allows human suffering?"

"I don't believe God allows the suffering. I believe God suffers when creation suffers," she says.

"Ok, even if we believe God doesn't allow suffering, does God care that humans suffer? Judaism believes in a God that is active in human lives," I say. My friend nods.

"But how do we align that conception of God with a God that allows humanity to experience pain and suffering? Some of the survivors I have interviewed have such horrific stories. Stories of being beaten, watching people killed, terror, and bare survival. I want to know how Jews after the Holocaust continue to believe in a God that allowed them to go through those experiences. I struggle with the existence and role of God based on the drastically lesser amount of suffering I experience in my own life."

"Some Jews aren't able to continue believing in God. I believe humans have free will, we are capable of doing awful things to each other," she says.

"And illness? How do we understand that?" I ask.

"For all of our strength, humans are frail. We get sick," she says.

"What is the point then? Why are we here? Is the point to see how much we can suffer, how much we can stand? Are we just pawns in a game? Kind of like if we make it out alive we win the game, but we know we can't ever make it out alive."

She watches me, but doesn't yet answer. Feeling the need to qualify my thoughts I say, "Look, I know about helping others, learning compassion, about raising little humans, which I love. But I can't help wondering if in the end no matter how much of a difference we make we will die, and the people we have affected will eventually die, and so on the cycle goes. Why all of it?"

I pause, fingering the straw in my vodka and strawberry drink. “Life is so hard, and I have to wonder what do I tell my daughter? What is it all for? I look at my kids and wonder, how do I explain to them why they will work so hard to be hurt by so much? Then after listening to the survivors I have interviewed I feel ashamed for thinking life is hard.” I stop, and take in a breath, willing myself to not cry.

“Life is hard in different ways,” she says, “and you can’t do the type of work we do without internalizing some of that pain.”

“But if I could find the point, the purpose, it would be easier. But I feel like you work so hard to make a difference and in the end, does it?”

“To the person you help it does,” she says.

“When I started studying the Holocaust I felt grounded in my understanding of religion,” I start. My friend asks, “What is that understanding?”

“I believed that even if we all understood God differently it was likely the same essence and it was a benevolent essence. As I started interviewing Holocaust survivors, real people who experienced such horrific loss, I began asking how humans could do such things to each other. Then with both of my parents getting sick, feeling overwhelmed raising four kids, trying to finish school while working, I started feeling like life was too hard. But it was still worth it to me because I saw what I was doing as important, working to make the world a better place,” I say.

“What changed?” she asks.

“I did more interviews, read memoirs, became more immersed in a world of suffering and began to feel overwhelming guilt for feeling like my life was too hard. I haven’t experienced loss, illness, starvation, fear about whether I will survive one more

day. How can I feel like life is too hard? My life is easy compared to theirs. Then I started to question why God allows so much suffering in the world. How do I maintain belief in a God that allows life to look this way?"

"Theological despair," she says quietly.

"What?" I ask.

"You are experiencing theological despair. Because you are internalizing the pain of others you are questioning not just on behalf of your own pain, but theirs as well. Most people don't internalize the pain of others the way you do. That is why this is so hard on you," she says.

"There isn't anything special about it. Anyone can empathize with others," I say.

"You are right, if they wanted to or tried to. That is the difference. You *want* to know other people's experiences from within so you can feel as much as you can of how they feel. It connects you to others. Do you know why you got into Holocaust research?" she asks.

"No, I don't really remember."

"Because you have a Jewish neshamah," she says.

"What does that mean?"

"A Jewish soul. It means that in a prior life you were Jewish and that has carried with you so you want to know, as much as you can, how we as Jews experience the pain and loss. And you want to question God on behalf of the Jews who have suffered and who continue to suffer. "

"I wish I knew how to explain that to the survivors I spend time with. One of the survivors asked me if I was Jewish and when I said no she asked why I was doing this. I told her that I have been studying the Holocaust for a number of years and that I had a friend in

high school who lost her grandparents in the Shoah. She said, 'You will never understand,' with such finality. It made me so sad because I feel like I am doing my best to understand what it feels like to the survivors, not just to an outsider. I believe that if we all could not just understand, but internalize the pain of others as well, we might be able to change the world."

"But most people don't want to feel another person's pain the way you do," she says.

"But we should. If we did maybe we wouldn't be self-absorbed. I think of my own life, my own pain, and think what the hell is wrong with you? You have everything! You have a job you love, four beautiful children, a husband who cares about you, and while my mother's health is failing she is still with us. Who am I to complain? Think about all the people suffering in the world, who have lost everything. How can I even think I have problems? These aren't problems, these are life." I stop, tears spilling over the rim of my eyes and down my cheeks.

After a moment I brush the tears away and continue, "What do I say to my daughter about why we should work so hard to make a difference in the world when in the end we are all going to die, the difference will be for naught and I can't even in good conscience tell her it is because it pleases God, when I can't explain how or why God allows creation to suffer the way it does."

"I believe we are here to learn certain lessons and God suffers as we make mistakes trying to learn them. We are learning how to treat one another with kindness and compassion. To be good to one another. We are learning to be human. As we do that, as we learn, we repair the world. Tikkun Olam," she says with her loving smile.

****

December 10, 2011

Realizing Dan is talking to me I try to shake away the vestiges of the memory. “I take pride in my work. If I let you leave with a tat looking like some novice did it and you tell somebody I did it, that makes me look bad,” he says.

“Dan, what I am asking for is harder than you think. A novice couldn’t intentionally make it look like slash marks. Remember, if you are using a straight razor the lines aren’t perfect, and there aren’t curves either,” I say.

He pauses just staring at me. Finally, “I don’t get it. Why do you want it to look like this?”

“Because it is how I see the world, and I have to remember.”

December 2, 2011

My mind is racing; my memories of my friend’s words force an audible cry to escape my mouth. Why? Why is any of this worth it? I close my eyes and focus on my breathing. ‘In through the nose, out through the mouth.’ Running my fingers over my forearm gently, I know it isn’t the razor I want, but I will be forever changed. The indelible marks inked into my arm will permanently scar me, remind me. Repairing the world, that is our job. Remembering, that is my job. Internalizing so that when my world seems too hard, and it feels like humans experience too much suffering I will remember. Placing the razor on the ledge next to the shampoo bottle, I stand, turn off the water, get out of the shower, and dry off. I swipe my hand across the foggy mirror and a distorted image of my already swollen face emerges.

“Tikkun Olam,” I say out loud watching my lips form the words.

December 10, 2011

"What's the bottom half?" Dan asks, still unconvinced.

"It is the same, but in Hebrew."

"That's stupid. Why would you say the same thing twice? Seems like people would think you just didn't know what you were doing."

Sweat breaking out on my body causes my skin to feel like it is stinging. Thousands of nerve endings are sticking out of the edge of my skin as if I am being shocked.

"Ok Dan, look, I don't know if you will get this, or if you care but here it is. I study genocide, the systematic killing of people because of race, religion or gender, and events like the Holocaust, Rwanda, Uganda, and Darfur. I have interviewed Holocaust survivors whose stories would make your blood run cold," I say, pausing to see if he is listening.

"The top line is in English. It looks carved because that is how I see the world now. The bottom line, the flowing Hebrew, is the way I believe the world should be and the way I hope it will be one day." I lower my eyes and wait.

"What does it mean?" he asks

"To repair the world," I say.

Dan nods and begins gathering his tools.

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Struggling to Tell the Victim's Story and the Complexities of Personal Narrative

"I'm trying to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut" (Gloria Anzaldúa, qtd in Keating, 2006, pg, 13).

My story problematizes suffering and despair as a struggle between healing and making meaning in a post-Holocaust world. Internalizing the convergence of the stories of

Jewish Holocaust survivors and survivors of the genocide in Rwanda alongside my own suffering, my dissertation is an exploration of the role of communication in understanding and responding to the suffering of others, and my own.

Using Gloria Anzaldúa's metaphors of "Borderlands Identity," and "nepantlas," I aspire to illustrate my journey. Encountering the "Borders" of my identity created a crisis. At that crossroads, trying to weave between intersecting identities, nepantlas, I finally understand my borderland identity. "Living on the borders and in the margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element" (Anzaldúa, 1987, Preface). Christina Boyles claims:

> …a nepantlera is given two choices: to retain his/her present identity or undergo a process of rebirth. Only at this point, where identity is ambiguous, is true transformation possible. Anzaldúa notes that this stage is marked by 'struggle and all is chaos: you don't know what you are, you're a different person, you're becoming a new person, a new identity,' (Interviews/Entrevistas 239). Yet in the end, this process, if successful, results in the formation of a new identity that both embodies and embraces complexities. (Boyles, 2014, 197)

I began to (re) invent my identity recognizing that I would never heal from my suffering and despair, but I could use it to make meaning. The ongoing story, and issue, is about suffering. More importantly, I strive to understand why and how we need to communicate our suffering. In preparation for the following chapters, here are the lenses I believe will be useful.

Societal reaction to discourse about suffering creates a disjunction making it unacceptable to talk about certain forms of suffering or extensive trauma. When people suffer they turn to family, friends or religious figures for guidance and support. Certain degrees of suffering or forms of suffering, however, are distressing enough for the listener that they avoid hearing it. Two forms of suffering that are particularly overwhelming for listeners are repetitive suffering and existential suffering.

Repetitive suffering occurs when a person, over time, continuously has stressful or difficult events that cause sorrow in their lives. This form of suffering can become exhausting to the listener causing compassion fatigue. If the events go on for a long enough period of time the listener may avoid the person suffering because they cannot handle the drain of being constant support without much in return. For example, if I break my arm and tell my friends they will sympathize with me. If a month later I break my leg, a month later I lose a pet, a few weeks after that I am in a car wreck and a few weeks later I find out that my parent has a terminal illness, eventually it becomes overwhelming and the hearer/responder cannot handle the amount of suffering so they avoid hearing it.

Candace Clark (1987) in her article "Sympathy Biography and Sympathy Margin" discusses the margin of sympathy given to individuals and the circumstances under which that sympathy is provided and accepted. She claims, "One's moral worth and network ties affect how many emotional commodities, including 'units' of sympathy and compassion, can be claimed from others and that others feel they owe" (p. 300). Based on these criteria Clark uses a business model to delineate the appropriate reciprocal nature of sympathy based on her collected data. From the same data Clark discusses the "Sympathy Etiquette" or the "Rules for Sympathizees" as a series of etiquette rules that determine whether and

how much sympathy a person receives. I will examine the second rule in relation to my discussion of repetitive suffering, but I will provide the others here. The first rule is a person must not seek sympathy for a false or exaggerated reason (303). By seeking sympathy for an exaggerated claim the symapthizee is seen as no longer trustworthy and as Clark says, "Sympathy accounts may be closed" (304). The third rule is to make sure to claim some amount of sympathy or the sympathizee seems either detached from the community or possibly self-absorbed. The fourth rule is to ensure reciprocation of the sympathy. While Clark explains this reciprocation does not have to be directly sympathy for sympathy there must be gratitude, reciprocal sympathy, or deference.

Directly related to the above discussion of repetitive suffering is the second rule, "Even when legitimate grounds exist, do not claim 'too much' sympathy 'too often' or for 'too long'" (304) and the additional rule, "Do not accept sympathy too readily" (307). The examples in this section are of those who "overuse" their sympathy margin by having continued trauma, or those unable to move past a traumatic event, such as those who cannot cope with a divorce or other disaster within a reasonable amount of time (306). The sympatizees who have the continued trauma recognize the limit of the sympathy of others. An example Clark cites of a man in his 50's states:

> That month when I had three deaths in the family and my car broke down and my mother-in-law needed constant care and the kids were sick, well, it was too unbelievable. I was embarrassed to even tell people what was happening. I didn't bring up all the details. (306)

In essence someone experiencing repetitive suffering must be cautious not to overburden the sympathizer, or to drain their sympathy account. In reference to my statement above

the sympathy margin relates to societal discourse on human suffering and is antithetical to actual needs of humans in a state of despair. Harold Kushner (1981) who claims, "…when we cry out to God in our anguish, God responds by sending us people" (pg x). Kushner states, "God shows His opposition to cancer and birth defects, not by eliminating them…but by summoning forth friends and neighbors to ease the burden and to fill the emptiness" (140).

If my suffering is not tangible, as it is with a physical trauma or loss of a loved one, but instead is existential such as questioning the existence of God or the ethical nature of God the topic becomes taboo for most of society and discussion is not typically welcome. We have rote responses that we learn, through many religious traditions, and offer to people that ask those questions such as: God is testing me, my suffering is punishment for my actions, (quoting from Augustine's Sermon 240.3, "God is just; God is omnipotent. We would not suffer these evils in any way if we did not deserve them" qtd from Neusner, 1998, p. 88) or I may not understand my suffering but it is God's will (Foley 1988; Peres et al, 2007). But when those automatic reactions are not satisfactory to the questioner the responder feels stilted, incapable. I argue the societal rote response stems from the fear of the responder that they will be pushed into questioning their own belief in God, so they deflect the questions leaving the sufferer to manage theological despair on their own. Kushner (1981) tells the story of Ron, a young pharmacist who bought into a business with an older colleague. One night Ron, getting ready to close the shop, was shot by a teen junkie. It left him alive but a paraplegic. One friend said to Ron:

> …Somehow or other, everything that happens to us is meant for our good. Look at it this way. You were always a pretty cocky guy, popular with girls, flashy cars,

> confident you were going to make a lot of money. You never really took time to worry about the people who couldn't keep up with you. Maybe this is God's way of teaching you a lesson…Maybe this is God's way of purging you of pride and arrogance… It's His way of making you a better, more sensitive person. (22)

Ron's friend, in an attempt to be comforting, made the tragic event that occurred to Ron his fault. Kushner responds by saying, "The problem with a line of reasoning like this one is that it isn't really meant to help the sufferer or to explain his suffering. It is meant primarily to defend God…" (23). In essence we as the listener, for fear of our own response, will not listen. This is commonly true of outsiders being asked to listen to the narratives of Holocaust survivors and was one reason behind the era of silence (Felman and Laub 1997). In talking about responses to suicidal despair Darrell Fasching (2001) suggests:

> We may come armed with our statistics, our procedures, and our techniques but when faced with the question of the meaning of life, who among us is an expert?...What we may fear in such an encounter is that our own hold on the meaning of life may be so precarious that in the attempt to dissuade the other we might lose the argument and be persuaded to join the other, embracing the darkness which surrounds us. (p. 88)

Various disciplines have tried addressing an understanding of the Holocaust including history, communication, literary studies, religious studies, and social sciences. One criticism of the social sciences is that it is distanced from human emotion, especially suffering. In order to understand experiences such as the Holocaust we cannot remove the very real human emotion.

> Great hopes are invested in the possibility that where people can be made to *feel* more sympathy towards, and responsibility for, the suffering of others, then they shall be motivated to act against political decisions and social conditions that damage and ruin human life. (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 114)

But the challenge is how to make people "feel" for the suffering of others? And what are the personal implications for feeling the suffering of others?

Just like a society that offers poor and unmeaningful answers to our suffering, scholars find themselves in similar positions. The answers are not meaningless, the intent of the response has meaning, but the response itself is unmeaningul to the sufferer. The question remains, how can I portray the suffering of another without diminishing the importance of that suffering? "…in almost every instance where sociologists and anthropologists address the meaning of suffering in human experience, they bear testimony to a sense of failing in their task" (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 116). The common struggle to not only understand human suffering, but to attempt to relate mass scale suffering to others eludes even the most well-meaning scholar.

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Challenging Narcissism and Co-opting the Victim's Story

Studying mass scale traumatic events such as the Holocaust and interviewing Holocaust survivors affects people (Jews and non-Jews) in different ways. Because I have studied religion for a number of years, including religious responses to suffering, it never occurred to me that an in-depth study of the Holocaust and Rwandan genocide, including intensive reading of memoirs, and interviewing Holocaust survivors, would trigger a spiral into my own theological despair. I had to sink to the bottom in order to even realize I was

sinking. While it took almost four years to fully manifest, even as early as Spring 2010 I was beginning the descent toward theological crisis. Numerous studies have cited the effects on therapists and interviewers of Holocaust survivors to not only acknowledge the existing phenomenon but serve as a guide to those who work as interviewers. The phenomenon is commonly called vicarious traumatization, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. The dominant literature regarding this phenomenon is found in Medical, Psychology, Traumatology, and Nursing journals. This literature is related to how these professions (focusing on therapists) deal with the psychological effects of working with clients that have suffered traumatic experiences not specifically genocide (Brady, Guy, Poelstra, and Fletcher, 1999; Culver, McKinney, and Paradise, 2011; Figley, 1995; Jenkins and Baird, 2002; Kadambi and Ennis, 2008; McCann and Pearlman, 1990; and Naturale, 2007).

The impact of interviewing Holocaust survivors has not been studied in as much depth, but research is emerging on the effects (Goldenberg, 2002; Mazor, Gampel, Horwitz, 1997). Counter-transference (using therapist's terminology) and vicarious traumatization are the labels used to describe the impact of interviewing Holocaust survivors on the interviewer (Mazor, Gampel, Horwitz 1997). Mazor, Gampel, and Horwitz (1997) saw similarities in the emotional impact between therapists working with Holocaust survivors and interviewers. Drawing on Dori Laub's research, Mazor, Gampel, and Horwitz claim that the interviewer/ee relationship, while functioning differently than the therapist/client relationship, can result in a similar experience of counter-transference or vicarious traumatization. They quote Laub saying, "'For this limited time, I'll be with you all the way, as much as I can. I want to go wherever you go, and I'll hold and protect you along this

journey…'(p.70)" (p.1). The significance of this statement is profound. As Mazor, Gampel, and Horwitz claim, the interviewer, while in a short-term relationship as opposed to a long term therapeutic relationship, expresses willingness to immerse themselves with the survivor in the stories and remain in the stories until they have been told. "…the interviewer's empathic listening discloses the capacity of bearing witness to the survivor's revelations" (Mazor, Gampel, Horwitz, 1997, p. 2). While there is not significant literature on this topic Goldenberg (2002) also discusses the effect of Holocaust survivor stories on the interviewer.

Goldenberg (2002) discusses the impact of hearing traumatic stories claiming that while there is a fair amount of literature on the cathartic effects of Holocaust survivors telling their stories, "…very little has been written about the impact on those who interview survivors and listen to their narratives" (p. 217). In examining the impact of interviewing Holocaust survivors on the interviewer Goldenberg theorized that there were dominantly benefits to interviewing Holocaust survivors. Her data supported her theory in that the respondents did claim more beneficial than negative impacts. Goldenberg claims, "Despite listening to many traumatic narratives of torture, murder, and unspeakable horror, our interviewer respondents are still able to view the world and humanity in a positive light…" (p. 227). Her intention was to examine whether vicarious traumatization did occur to those interviewers of Holocaust survivors. What she found was that each interviewer claimed to have changed, but rather than exhibiting dominantly the signs of vicarious traumatization as defined by Mazor, Gampel, and Horwitz ("a sense of paralysis, outrage and anger, withdrawal and numbness, fear and hyper-emotionality" p. 1) overwhelmingly the change had been for the better. "Knowing them has helped us appreciate what we have,

reprioritize our concerns, deepen our compassion for others, force us to examine our own lives, relationships, belief systems, and prejudices… Perhaps it would be more appropriate to refer to it as transformation" (Goldenberg, 2002, p. 227-228).

While there are certain traumatic experiences that coincide with vicarious traumatization such as the emotions of disappointment in humanity, anger at the treatment of the victims, sadness, etc., as Goldenberg (2002) shows there are absolutely benefits to interviewing Holocaust survivors and the type of relationship that exists in that (as described by Dori Laub above). The vicarious traumatization I experienced made me a secondary witness and that made me a spiritual survivor, not in any way similar to a Holocaust survivor, but rather in a similar way to what Darrell J. Fasching calls alienated theology. I saw myself, and my religious tradition, through the eyes of "the stranger" in this case the Jewish Holocaust survivor. Because I am alienated by my experience with the stories of the Holocaust survivors my despair is shaped by theirs. But not just despair, theological despair. Also because my theological despair has been shaped by the stories I have heard and internalized I reached out to theologians of the Jewish tradition to guide me through my despair. One cannot understand those theologians (Cohen, Rubenstien, Greenberg, Fackenheim, Wiesel) without understanding the history of Judaism and the history of the traumatization of and protest of the Jewish people.

When I began this research in Summer 2009 I did not feel like I was experiencing a traumatic emotional, and more importantly, religious transformation. Certain memoirs, or stories would make me emotional, but I didn't feel as though I was internalizing the suffering. I also didn't realize the effect it was already having on my religious perspective. I found myself asking the questions that Jewish theologians, and many other scholars, have

been asking since the Holocaust, "Where was God during the Holocaust? Where is God as his creation suffers? How can we understand God in the face of suffering? How can we conceive of a God that allows creation to suffer so enormously? What is the purpose and what does it all mean if in the end we all succumb to death each making only a small contribution, a small ripple, in the ocean of suffering?"

Studying genocide brings to the forefront what humans do to one another and questions about how a divine presence such as God could exist and allow that degree of suffering. How do those who have survived genocide continue their lives in the face of their own theological despair? This question drove my study. However, what I did not expect was the aforementioned personal traumatization from not only the interviews, memoirs, and in depth research I was doing, but the distinct sense of guilt from feeling as though my own life is difficult. I found myself questioning whether God existed at all. I could not reconcile a loving God with the suffering of the world. And if I couldn't make that leap, how is it possible for someone who survived the Holocaust to reconcile with God? Worse yet, if God is not responsible for the suffering of humans, is God indifferent to the suffering? The intersection of my anger at God, for either allowing human suffering or being indifferent to human suffering, and my drive toward social justice (specifically connecting to the suffering of others in a meaningful way and encouraging actions for the good of others) led me to this dissertation topic.

According to Darrell Fasching (2001) in his essay on religion and suicide "…the path from anxiety to despair is crucial to bring about a saving transformation which rescues one from the abyss of meaninglessness" (p. 95). As I began working on my dissertation I was trying to tell the stories of the Jewish Holocaust survivors I was interviewing, but my story

kept getting in the way. I believed, as I began my research and writing, that in order to be able to communicate the suffering of others you had to be able to understand it. I felt I was crossing over a boundary to embrace the identity of the victims so I could narrate their story. My first crisis point came when a survivor told me that as a non-Jew I would never understand their despair no matter how hard I tried. As I attempted to move back and forth between these identities I experienced a border that I was unable to cross. As that frustration was coupled with the amount of suffering and despair recounted in the stories I heard and as I read, the crisis continued to build.

My ability to cope with the suffering I had internalized from listening to and reading these stories was challenged. As my personal suffering grew, the lack of control I felt became a symbol for the lack of ability to repair the despair of others. As this intensified I moved into a state of theological despair. Coming from a type of Christianity in childhood that frequently responds to suffering with answers such as, "It is God's will," or "You must have done something to deserve the suffering you are experiencing," I was unarmed to cope with my spiritual crisis so I began moving away from Christianity and began to embrace Jewish theology.

Throughout history questioning or wrestling with God is not only allowed, but an integral part of Jewish theology, as long as it is on behalf of God's creation and not merely for selfish purposes. Storytellers, such as Elie Wiesel, raised in Hasidism (Jewish mysticism), embrace both aspects of Jewish theology, the love and devotion to God *and* the willingness to wrestle with God. Wiesel expresses his willingness to wrestle with God by placing God "on trial" for the Holocaust but is clear that he is not willing to deny God. In the

film *Elie Wiesel: First Person Singular* (2002) Wiesel claims one can be a Jew *for* God or *against* God but one cannot be a Jew *without* God (Zuckerman). The more research I did on the Holocaust and the suffering the Jews experienced the more I embraced the idea of demanding answers from God. But when I didn't feel like I had come to satisfactory answers, I rejected the God of Abraham as being either cruel or indifferent. I did not yet understand that for Jewish tradition God is not the answer to all our questions, but the question to all our answers.

The tattoo I got in December 2011, described in the beginning scenes, was a direct result of a year of increased hardship. Within one year I had: immersed myself in Holocaust memoirs, written a prospectus, had my academic integrity questioned, changed my topic and immersed myself in Rwandan genocide memoirs, written a second prospectus, had my work ethic questioned, my mother and father had illnesses requiring multiple hospitalizations, my husband severely injured his shoulder eliminating his ability to help with household duties for several months, and I continued to teach on the topic that I was not able to do my dissertation on. The end of 2011 found me sitting on my shower floor feeling like a failure in nearly every aspect of life. One week later I had Tikkun Olam tattooed on my left forearm.

Early that year I was told of rumors circulating questioning my academic integrity by others working in the same area, so I decided to protect myself by separating myself from any other student in my Department doing work that incorporated the Holocaust and applied what I had learned to the study of the Rwandan Genocide. The impression of God as cruel or indifferent only intensified as I researched the horrors that occurred in Rwanda.

After all I had read and heard from the survivors of the Holocaust to then read about the horrors of the genocide in Rwanda, I was no longer able to accept any answer from a God that allowed all of the tragedy to occur. When I submitted that work it was perceived as an attempt at an easy way out so my work ethic was then called into question.

To have plunged into that world only to have my integrity still questioned intensified my identity crisis. I was standing at a borderlands. I was at the intersection between demonstrating dedication as a graduate student and being a full time faculty member, being a mother of four children, and being a caregiver for my aging parents as their only child. I was in the liminal space between working full time as a faculty member and not having full access to the identity of "faculty." I was at the border between Judaism and Christianity. I was at the border of being religious and non-religious. Everywhere I turned the questioning of my identity created fissure. I now identify that borderland identity as what Anzaldúa calls "nepantla." Keating (2006) states "…nepantla indicates liminal space where transformations can occur…[and] indicates space/times of great confusion, anxiety, and loss of control" (8). Keating (2006) goes on to explain:

> During nepantla, our worldviews and self-identities are shattered. Nepantla is painful, messy, confusing, and chaotic; it signals unexpected, uncontrollable shifts, transitions, and changes. Nepantla hurts!!!! But nepantla is also a time of self-reflection, choice, and potential growth…radical dis-identification and transformation. We dis-identify with existing beliefs, social structures, and models of identity… (p. 9)

Finally my mother's seemingly innocuous comment, "maybe this career isn't for you," caused an explosion. It triggered a profound crisis that led to communicating my suffering the most expressive, indelible way I could by tattooing Tikkun Olam on my left forearm. Sitting in the shower that night I knew I didn't want to take a razor to my skin. What I wanted, needed, was some kind of release. I associated pain and permanent marking with the release that could remind me of the pain of others, and the intense nature of the suffering of others. I also wanted to be constantly reminded that no matter what, my job was to work to help repair the world, Tikkun Olam. There would always be hope for the future as long as people were fighting to repair the world. I use it as a reminder of my borderland identity and it was an identity that required me to make meaning of despair, and not allow myself to be consumed by it.

I never rejected Wiesel's perspective on God, but I did not yet fully understand it. Because of all that I was experiencing I did reject God's seeming inability to respond to the suffering of humans. In response my perspective shifted to embrace ritualism. In hindsight this aligns with Rubenstein's claim that the vision of the God of Abraham had died at Auschwitz, and there needed to be a return to a form of pagan mysticism that relied on a human connection through ritual. I turned to the ritualized control I could feel through Santería. The worldview that claimed God was uninvolved and uninterested in human affairs and that the mediators, the orisha, were the ones able to aid humans spoke to me. The ability to perform ritual actions when in need provided a sense of clarity and control that I desperately needed in my life where I felt such a distinct lack of control.

This was an incomplete solution though. While embracing ritual gave me a sense of control and connection, I couldn't fully embrace a religion that incorporated killing to heal. Santería believes in using animal sacrifice to heal the person. While intellectually I can explain and defend the purpose of the practitioners using sacrifice, I could not myself participate. My deep connection to my sense of ethics kept pulling me back. Again I found myself taking part in a religion I was severed from in some way. Estrangement led to yet another reassessment of beliefs, an incorporation of alienated theology and again a turn to Tikkun Olam.

Grappling with the Limits of Writing to Heal

I began using writing as an outlet believing I could heal myself through the process. While the "bloodletting" of pouring everything onto the page allowed me to work through certain experiences and helped me understand them more clearly, it also made me question the therapeutic nature of writing.

Sitting today and looking back I am amazed by the last five years of my life. Each time I wrote more memories would open up and I would gain more insight into how I ended up where I was December 2011 and that following year. And with each insight I am encouraged. Over the last two years I compartmentalized so many events as "not related" to my despair that I wasn't even sure how I had gotten there or why.

But there was one small box in the attic of my mind, a small wooden box with a tiny metal latch on the front. I left that box unopened in my mind for so long that it had been shoved into the back behind so many other memories deemed "unimportant." When I cracked the box open, just barely, feeling like it was time to let my committee know about

the events that I had stored away in the box in my mind it flew open setting off a cacophony as the boxes around it rattled and began opening on their own. The more I wrote, the more I thought, the more I understood. I came to a position of self-reflection, something I couldn't have done without writing.

After seeing some of the narrative one of my committee members became slightly concerned and asked if I was actually ready to do this type of work, to write through despair hoping to come out the other side changed. At the time my answer was, I don't know. I will take it slow, I have strong support, and I guess we will see. But the truth is writing to heal can be a dangerous method. Possibly one of the most dangerous. Anzaldúa claims:

> Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking at it. When it begins to fester I have to do something to put an end to the aggravation and to figure out why I have it. I get deep down into the place where it's rooted in my skin and pluck it away…making the pain worse before it can get better. (Anzaldúa, 1987, 73)

When we write to heal our wounded bodies, our wounded souls, we take ourselves into the depths, the dungeons. We know we don't have to expose the writing to anyone else if we choose not to. Because of that we will write the unedited, ugly truth about events, others, and even ourselves. When people talk to therapists there is the possibility that they won't admit every ugly detail for fear of making themselves look awful, but in writing that no one will see we can expose the honest truth.

In that way I may create a circumstance under which only I know how far I have traveled into the dungeon of despair. Henry Miller claimed, "The writing may have seemed monstrous (to some), for it was a violation, but I became a more human individual because of it. I was getting the poison out of my system" (DeSalvo, 5). But as we release the poison it can be toxic. The immediate effect of writing about trauma is not always positive as indicated by studies such as Pennebaker 1990. Over the course of months people writing about traumatic events began to feel better, but the immediate aftermath was coping with difficult feelings. What are the dangers of writing through trauma as opposed to writing from a safe distance of time? Do those dangers outweigh the benefits? Looking at the traumatic experiences of Holocaust survivors and Rwandan survivors alongside my own, I believe writing is an ethical calling that could allow me to, as Wiesel says, demand from the world "Never Again."

Traversing the landscape of my own despair, and becoming immersed in the world of genocide survivors has taken me into theological despair, a crisis of meaning, to eventually determine that suffering and despair can have different meanings and uses, and not all of them are necessarily bad. After believing my suffering was a symbol for lack of control or an inability to make a change in the larger world I have come to two major realizations. First, I communicate my despair not because it heals me. In fact writing through the despair is painful and can create a dungeon that I can become lost in. But, if through the process I can make even a small change in the world around me, by touching even one person through my story, or what I have learned from my story, or the lessons I teach because of the experiences I have had, then communicating the despair has been

worth the painful process. The suffering has been given meaning by being put to use, to help heal the world in some way, Tikkun Olam. It is not about healing myself through telling the story, but about finding a narrative that gives meaning and integrity despite not being healed or made whole.

The second realization is that no matter how hard any of us work there will still be suffering in the world. This has created significant conflict for me. A large part of me feels if the human community is working to repair the world we should be able to get to a point where suffering is eliminated. Recognizing that suffering and despair will continue in the human community no matter how hard humans work to make a difference is disillusioning.

> One can only work to keep memory alive and struggle to be a healer. The world outside the self is silent. Thus, each of us lives without the comfort of verifiable meanings. We must come to grips with the chaos, uncertainty, and brutality of life – evil, hatred, violence, disease, war, discrimination – without the expectation of a grand narrative of eternal truth (s). (Bochner, 2014, pg 31)

Now I realize, making meaning out of suffering does not mean justifying it, but rather standing in defiance of suffering, refusing to be disillusioned by the continuance of despair, and refusing to allow the world to change me by making me part of the problem. Ethics is not about whether we are successful, but about doing what we ought to even if we likely *won't* be successful and I came to realize this was the gift from the post-Holocaust theologians to me as we will see in the next chapter. My borderland identity incorporates a spirituality of despair, having the integrity to question everything recognizing **the infinite,**

or God, is found in the questions not the answers, and seeking the presence of the divine in Tikkun Olam.

Wiesel argues that he began writing to change the world and then he kept writing to not be changed by the world. "In the beginning," as Wiesel frequently says, "I thought I could change man. Today I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, is to prevent man from ultimately changing me" (Brown, 1983, p. 42). In a similar way this dissertation has been an experiment in trying to communicate suffering and meaning in a post-Holocaust world where my story and the survivors stories both have similarities of theological despair, an ethic of defiance, and most certainly a refusal to be changed by the world.

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Dissonance exists in efforts to communicate about suffering and despair. Showcasing common societal flawed reactions to despair begs for discourse to create a more communicatively healthy response. Attempting to communicate the suffering of others and feeling like I was failing at that goal led to my own suffering. Using writing as a method of personal healing created an intersection of personal narratives of suffering and victim's narratives (which can allow for the co-opting of the story and narcissism). Grappling with the limits of writing to heal provided a lens to see the victim's narratives in such a way that created self-reflexivity. Rather than equating the suffering of the victim's to my own, which I absolutely do not do, instead I found potential answers to despair in the post-Holocaust theologians. This dissertation is an experiment in trying to communicate suffering and meaning in a post-Holocaust world where my story and the survivors stories

both have similarities of theological despair an ethic of defiance, and most certainly a refusal to be changed by the world.

CHAPTER TWO

IDENTITY BORDERS: POST-HOLOCAUST JEWISH THOUGHT AND THE PARADOX OF THEOLOGICAL DESPAIR

Hasidism and the Holocaust

> I really don't understand all this religious observance in other people like us… I have paid for the right to be a Jew many times over. So whom should I have to prove this to anymore? Do I really need to be a religious Jew to still be a good Jew? (Bernstein, 1997, p. 338)

Sara Tuvel Bernstein spoke these words to her adult daughter as they walked along together on Shabbat. She continued by saying:

> Some people, like Helinka, became very, very religious after the liberation. They believe that a Jewish God helped them to survive the nightmare of the camps and that they should thank God now for all their remaining days by being religious. But not me. I think now, how could any God, Jewish or not, have let such horrible things happen, such inhumanity of man against man no matter what their religion? How can I be a pious Jew after what I have seen? (Bernstein, 1997, p. 338)

What made Bernstein's comment powerful was her daughter's statement that followed, "I was surprised by her comments, since when I was growing up, she kept a kosher home, and cleaned and cooked fervently the day before each Passover began. She

fasted every Yom Kippur, but would not permit us, even as teenagers, to fast" (Bernstein, 1997, p. 338). I was surprised by this then. I did not yet fully understand the paradox of despair and faithfulness that typifies Jewish faith. But I would learn.

The impact of the Holocaust on Jewish religious belief and practice has been powerful and varied. Various Jewish scholars have responded to the dominant question of how Jews understand their Jewishness after the Holocaust. Foundational to Judaism is the covenant of Sinai between God and the Jews as his chosen people. That agreement, understood as bi-directional, claims the Jews must be faithful to God and follow God's commands and in return God will preserve the Jews through history. Events in Judaic history, such as the Babylonian Exile, the destruction of the First Temple and the Diaspora following the destruction of the Second Temple, made Jews question whether they were faithful enough as a community to the covenant. But the atrocities of the Shoah forced Jews to question whether in fact it was God who had broken the covenant, considering that "among the dead were over 80% of the Jewish scholars, rabbis, full-time students and teachers of the Torah…" (Greenberg, 1977, p. 306). This questioning resulted in a variety of responses. In what follows I will briefly discuss those formative events in early Jewish history and then outline five models based on my understanding of Darrell Fasching's work on post-Holocaust Judaism, the two models most extremely opposed to each other and then the three models falling between those.

The covenant of the Israelite people began with Abraham and was sealed with Moses. The covenant, or pact, claimed that if the Israelite people were faithful to the God of Abraham, God would preserve them throughout history. In 586 B.C.E., under the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's rule, the Israelite temple was destroyed and the

Israelites were exiled. The destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Israelites forced a reexamination of their relationship between God and his chosen people. As prophets began to question God's allowance of the exile, a normative story emerged, one of exile and return. This normative story argued that if the people were faithful to God they would be rewarded; if the people disobeyed God they would be punished. The normative story provided a framework for a better future for the Israelite people. If the people were faithful to God they would be allowed to return to their homeland. The normative story was reinforced when the Persians, under King Cyrus, conquered Babylon. Cyrus allowed all exiled peoples to return to their home in 538 B.C.E.

The book of Ezekiel, one of the first literary examples of promising hope for a brighter future, provides the Israelites with the words of God through their prophet. The word of God claims the Israelites had been unfaithful to God by building and worshipping idols; God punished them by displacing them. Ezekiel expressed God's promise; the wrath of God would end and the people would be made new. The well-known example from Ezekiel is a vision during which God placed Ezekiel in a land of dry bones.

> The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. 3 He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." (Ezekiel 37: 1-3 New International Version).

Yet the bones would be covered once again by flesh, or reintegrated and made whole by the Lord (Ezekiel 37:11-14, New International Version).

> Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! 5 This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath[a] enter you, and you will come to life. 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’” 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.9 Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. (Ezekiel 37: 4-10 New International Version)

This passage is taken to represent the whole land of Israel. Ezekiel claims God is going to bring change to the Israelites including a new future, in which they will be protected by God.

> Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ 12 Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 14 I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will

settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'" (Ezekiel 37: 11-14 New International Version)

The importance of the symbolism of Ezekiel's vision is the connection to the destruction and recreation of the people, correlating to the (re) invention of identity as a community.

However, in 63 BCE the Jews invited Rome in to protect them from outside oppression (Esposito, Fasching, Lewis, 2015, p. 91). While this initially seemed a positive move, it proved fatal to the Israelite people as the Romans became their new oppressors. Jewish zealots led a revolt against Rome and the Romans forced the Israelite people out of their homeland. The Jews have lived in diaspora ever since.

Jewish history has been turbulent, fraught with persecution and pogroms throughout the Middle Ages. Then Hasidism, a mystical form of Judaism, rose as a result of a period of pogrom, or mass extermination of Jews in the 17th century. The Chmielnicki massacre of Jews in Poland (1648-1649) took the lives of an estimated 200,000 Jews.

Fifty years following the Chmielnicki massacre, Yisroel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov meaning "master of the good name," founder of the Hasid movement, was born in 1698. Early in his life he had a strong command of Torah and was becoming a charismatic teacher. When he was 36 his teacher revealed to him the time had come to make himself public. Because of that his 36th year, 1734, was the founding year of the Hassid movement.

Characteristic to the Hasidim is joy. In response to the pogroms, or persecution of the Jews, of the 17th century Hasidism developed from Kabbalism. Hasidism argues:

> ...joy is the appropriate response to the world no matter how much suffering Jews experience. In fact, although Hasidism emerged in an era of pogrom and immense suffering in eastern Europe, the Hasidim say that there is no greater sin than melancholy, or sadness…sadness, which stems from ignorance of the pervasive presence of God in all things, is the root of all sin…God hides himself in creation. (Esposito, Fasching, Lewis, 113)

The Baal Shem Tov taught that depression, sadness, or melancholy were an affront to God. According to Hasidism God is within everything and therefore separateness was mere illusion (Jacobson-Maisels, 4 If the divine exists in everything then God is also with humans in every experience. Therefore to react to any experience with sadness is to isolate humans from God. James Jacobson-Maisels, (2007-2008), expresses the perspective of the Besht (acronym for Baal Shem Tov) that as humans we have the choice to either increase the "demons" we encounter (characterized with examples such as fear, sadness, anger, suffering) by attempting to oppose them and drive them out of one's being, or accept them and act out of compassion. "We go beyond the self by returning to it, by embracing it in its fullness with all its blemishes, failures, and shame" (Jacobson-Maisels, 3).

Analyzing the Besht's teachings, Jacobson-Maisels claims the psychological strategy is a way to overcome the distraction associated with those very demons. "…the strategy the Besht teaches is a psychological reversal of the normal reaction to pain and opposition. By uprooting one's normal psychological reaction and instead responding with joy, acceptance, and beneficence, the pain, opposition, or distraction disappears" (Jacobson-Maisels, 8). Hasidism believes that even in times of greatest suffering rather than succumb

to the suffering, one should refuse to despair, rather finding God in the midst of their despair.

The worldview of Hasidism is significant because of the influence it had on the theologians I will discuss below. Each of these theologians had some influence of the Hasidic movement, even if they were not all raised in the tradition as Wiesel was. The ability to contextualize the adherence to joy over despair even in the face of suffering is necessary to understand the following theologians and the final perspective of defiance against despair, which would become my own.

Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought

The following will make use of my understanding of Darrell Fasching's five models of responses to the Holocaust. Two extremes reflect the rejection of the religion of Judaism or an adherence to Judaic Orthodoxy. Those rejecting Judaism are reflected by primarily two strands, those who rejected everything associated with Judaism as a religion and as their heritage, and those who rejected the religion but maintained their connection to their Jewish ethnicity. At the other extreme are the ultra-orthodox Jews. "Ultra-Orthodox Jews attempt to recover what they believe has been lost to modern Judaism, namely, the centrality of God, Torah (as divine revelation), and Israel (as an eternal people), as central to pre-Holocaust Judaism" (Esposito, Fasching, Lewis, 2002, p. 119).

While there were certainly extreme reactions to the Holocaust, there were also many Jewish theologians and scholars who fell between those extremes. These individuals were attempting to answer the question, where was God during the Holocaust? Their views fall into one of three categories: those arguing that God was absent during the Holocaust,

those arguing it was ambiguous where God was during the Holocaust, and those arguing God was present during the Holocaust. In what follows I will briefly outline these three views for answering the question where was God during the Holocaust. I will first look at Arthur Cohen (Aligning with Model 3) and his claim that to move forward we must excavate the abyss of the Holocaust. Then I will describe Richard Rubenstein (Model 2) and the Death of God, followed by Emil Fackenheim (Model 4) and the 614thCommandment, Irving Greenberg (Model 3) and Momentary Faiths, and finally Elie Wiesel (Model 3) and Wrestling with the Stranger. (See Appendix A)

Arthur A. Cohen and Excavating the Abyss

Arthur Cohen (1981) argues that an event the magnitude of the Holocaust defies even rational thought and understanding. He claims that it is "…beyond the discourse of morality and rational condemnation" (8). The claim he makes is even the societal standards and context by which humanity discusses and deems an event based on moral criteria to be right, wrong, or evil are all conceptual relative boundaries that can no longer exist. He states, "What civilization once called murder or barbarism or cruelty or sadism has in our day become useless rhetoric…Words no longer command us, precisely because they no longer reflect concepts and convictions which directly govern and thereby agitate conscience" (Cohen, 1981, p. 10).

To Cohen the Holocaust represents the third caesura (pause or break), creating an abyss that humanity is forced to stare into and face. Following the canonical normative story of exile and return, the first caesura, Cohen (1981) claims, was the destruction of the Temple and Jewish settlement in Ancient Palestine (21). He states, "The Jews closed the

abyss by affirming their guilt, denying the abyss and taking upon themselves responsibility for the demonic" (p. 21). The second caesura was the Jewish expulsion from Spain, which Cohen also contextualizes with the normative story saying the Jews, "…closed the abyss once again not only by reaffirming their guilt, but more by transforming the event into an end-time gnosis in which a new heaven was limned and the unseen order became transparent to mystical understanding" (p. 21).

The Holocaust, the third caesura, cannot be reconciled, however, because as Cohen claims, "…the abyss opened and one-third of the Jewish people fell in" (Cohen, 1981, p. 21). Cohen argues that this caesura brings "…all creatures to the borderlands from which there is return for none" (p. 22).

Yet, Cohen argues, there must be way for Jews to continue into future existence. The goal is to find a way to continue a meaningful existence in a post-Holocaust world. To do that Cohen claims we must build a bridge over the open wound or abyss, never attempting to heal it or fill it with meaning or reason. "It is a bridge that spans the abyss but does not obscure it….however much the ineffaceable abyss informs them, their own being and proper life is elsewhere – on the bridge, in fact, over the abyss" (Cohen, 1981, p. 82).

To build a bridge over the abyss, leaving it open, is to recognize that we will not find adequate meaning to attribute to the event of the Holocaust. We also cannot simplify it to the label of "pure evil" because according to Cohen (1981) we *can* conceive of greater evil, "…we can conceive of a system that can murder all life" (9). The significance of this statement is that by labeling the Holocaust pure evil we are potentially extricating it from human nature, allowing ourselves to believe that something of that enormity could never happen again. Instead Cohen asserts, we must leave the wound open:

> …monstrous in its gaping, raw in its entrails, visible reminder of fire and magma, but now quiet, immovable presence, yawning over the lives of man. We may climb to the rim to examine its forbidding ugliness but what we carry away is not the knowledge of its being, but a memory of its being…There is no portion of the human earth that is not burned; there is no portion of the human earth that does not need redemption in order that growth be renewed. (Cohen, 1981, p. 108-109)

Redemption comes from the ability to make meaning post-Holocaust, recognizing the abyss and creating a bridge across it.

Richard Rubenstein and the Death of God

Fasching claims one extreme response to the Holocaust was rejection of Judaism as religion or "Secular Israeli Jews." The challenge, I see, is the similarity between the rejection of the religion and Richard Rubenstein's approach exemplified through "Judaism Going on without God." First let me define the difference, as I see it, between Model 1 and Model 2. Model 1 is reflective of those Jewish survivors that rejected the religion of Judaism, rejected God and yet remain connected to the community of Judaism creating a distinctly ethnic Judaism. While Model 2 also exemplifies Jews that have rejected God (or God as Judaism originally understood God to be) and remain connected to the community, the distinction is those Jews that align with this model are also continuing to follow the rituals of the religion. Those in Model 2, following God's Absence, are either rejecting God, or ambivalent about God's position but they continue to follow the rituals for a variety of reasons. Those that fall into Model 1 have rejected God, rejected Judaism and therefore reject following the rituals. They continue to have a connection to the community, sans

ritual, because as secular Jews they see the importance of that continuity through ethnicity not religious ritual.

The model of God's absence is portrayed in the writings of Richard Rubenstein (After Auschwitz, 1st ed.). He believed that the God of history, which the Jews believe in, died at Auschwitz. Rubenstein claimed that even though that God is dead the Jews must continue the rituals and practices of Judaism. In essence, lack of faith in God does not deny the necessity of ritual, which serves to sustain Jewish identity of the community and their covenant with the land of Israel. Richard Rubenstein has been associated with the "death of God" theology. However, Rubenstein's theology does not advocate atheism but rather that the God of Abraham, as conceived through Judaic history died at Auschwitz. Maybe a better way to phrase it is the way Jews conceptualized God, as active in their lives, can no longer be understood the same. The importance of this statement is that by rejecting the Jewish conception of God Rubenstein was not rejecting the community or ritual obligations. In fact by claiming the death of the Abrahamic conception of God Rubenstein actually did not negate the existence of a divine being.

Accepting an active God means accepting a God that created the world and has allowed suffering to exist throughout history, which means God is either indifferent to the suffering of humans or cruel. Rubenstein claims, "a God who tolerates the suffering of even one innocent child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent" (After Auschwitz, 1st ed. 86-87). In essence what Rubenstein is claiming is that the prior conception of God must change. "…the death of God is not something that has happened to God. It is a cultural event experienced by men and women, many of whom remain faithful members of their religious communities" (Rubenstein, 1, 2-13). Humans still need community. There are still the same

types of experiences that have drawn humans together, that are considered religious acts, since the beginning of time. "Throughout human history, traditionally prescribed rites of passage, such as circumcision, baptism, puberty rites, initiation rituals, weddings, and funerals, have played a singularly important role in the nomization process" (Rubenstein, 3, 4-10). All of these communal experiences are still an integral part of our lives as human and must still have a place within our communities. So, Rubenstein says we continue to practice the religious rituals with or without the understood existence of God.

Rubenstein does address how he understands the change in perception of God in later works (as recent as 2013).

> In place of a biblical image of a transcendent creator God, an understanding of God which gives priority to the indwelling immanence of the Divine may be more credible in our era…As the Ground of Being and of all beings, Divinity can be understood as the ground of feeling, thought and reflection. Human thought and feeling are thus expressions of divine thought and feeling, albeit in dialectical form. (Rubenstein, 2, 2-13)

In his early work, After Auschwitz, Rubenstein was charged with arguing for Judaism continuing its rituals without the need for God. I would argue that was never specifically his intent, and as he has more fully developed his argument through the second edition of After Auschwitz and into more recent works his argument is more fully and clearly expressed. In these more recent works it becomes clear that the earlier conception of God as active and present produces too many theological quandaries, such as the statement above that if God is active God is either cruel or indifferent. If God is active does God suffer with humanity? Is God bound by the laws of free will provided to humans? But

as Rubenstein is pointing out, these are all the characterizations that humans place on that conception of God.

> To speak, admittedly in inadequate language, of God as the 'Nothingness'; is not to suggest that God is a void; on the contrary, the Holy Nothingness is a plenum so rich that all existence derives therefrom. God as the 'Nothing' is not absence of being, but a superfluity of being. (Rubenstein, 3 2-13)

From these explications of Rubenstein's theology it is not necessary to reject God to fall in line with Model 2. Simply having an unidentifiable or undefinable perspective on God and maintaining ritualistic behavior aligns with Rubenstein's theology.

Emil Fackenheim and the 614th Commandment

Emil Fackenheim affirms God's presence at Auschwitz and in history. He also rejects the normative story that would relegate any responsibility of the Holocaust to the Jews. Rather than accepting any theological perspective that claims God was absent or silent at Auschwitz, Fackenheim argues that while we may not know the way of God we must know God was there. In Torah there are 613 mitzvoth (laws), but Fackenheim claims that God spoke through the death camps in a resounding voice announcing the 614th commandment. Jewish perseverance after the Holocaust is abiding by the 614th commandment which Fackenheim (1978) claims, "Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories to Hitler"(32). To resist providing victories to Hitler:

> They [the Jews] are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally they are forbidden to despair the God of

> Israel, lest Judaism perish…A Jew may not respond to Hitler's attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction. (Fackenheim, 1978, 32)

As example of Fackenheim's declaration of what he deems the 614th mitzvoth, Marcus and Rosenberg offer this survivor's statement:

> Before the Holocaust I was a simple observant Jew. Today I'm an observant Jew but very complex…I have now a clear reason in my mind and very deep motives for practicing Judaism whereas before it was not clear. Besides everything else, it's my revenge against Hitler and the Nazis…It is a spitting on their grave. My way of getting even is practicing my religion with fervor and enthusiasm. Serving God and the Jewish people and carrying on my father's and my grandfather's and ancestor's traditions. (419)

While many Jewish Holocaust survivors combine elements of these various post-Holocaust theologians, Fackenheim resonates with most Jews even if they disagree with his assessment of a 614th Commandment. The dedication to keep Judaism flourishing resonates with the Jewish community.

Irving Greenberg and Momentary Faiths

Irving Greenberg wrestles with God in much the same way Elie Wiesel does. Greenberg, through his redemptive covenant theology, argues that God broke the covenant and the Jewish people are no longer required to keep it. Yet, "[w]e are in the age of the renewal of the covenant. God is no longer in a position to command, but the Jewish people was so in love with the dream of redemption that it volunteered to carry out the mission" (Greenberg, 2007, p. 546).

Even though the Jewish people are voluntarily keeping covenant, Greenberg argues that it oscillates between moments of hope and moments of despair. Drawing on the Buberian concept of "moment gods," Greenberg argues that "God is known only at the moment when Presence and awareness are fused in vital life" (Greenberg, 1977, p. 319). Greenberg goes on to describe momentary faith by saying, "moments when Redeemer and vision of redemption are present, interspersed with times when the flames and smoke of the burning children blot out faith – though it flickers again" (Greenberg, 1977, p. 319). Greenberg believes God's presence is most clearly seen in the creation of the state of Israel (Greenberg, 1977, p. 337). There are clearly moments of deep despair, but "the religious enterprise after this event must see itself as a desperate attempt to create, save, and heal the image of God wherever it still exists…" (Greenberg, 1977, p. 332).

Greenberg describes here a faith that is realistic in a post-Holocaust world. To Greenberg we can no longer live in a world where the answers are more important than the questions. Especially when those answers are so clear and demanding that they require unquestioning obedience. He claims, "Nothing dare evoke our absolute, unquestioning loyalty, not even our God, for this leads to possibilities of SS loyalties" (Greenberg 1977, p. 328). Rather than live in a world where religion is able to answer every question and evoke a feeling of security Greenberg claims it is a matter of the frequency of faith. He claims, "The difference between a skeptic and the believer is the frequency of faith not the certitude of position" (Greenberg, 1977, p. 319). One should never have complete and unwavering, unquestioning faith in anything. If we do it can lead us to stop questioning on behalf of the other; instead we should live in "momentary faiths."

Elie Wiesel and Wrestling with the Stranger

Judaism was built, to some degree, on the practice of wrestling. The background of this concept comes from the story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger. As they wrestle through the night, the stranger refuses to give his name yet blesses Jacob giving him the name Israel which means one who has wrestled with God and man and prevailed (Genesis 32:23-34). The Jewish tradition took this story to be symbolic of arguing with God as a form of wrestling as Abraham did at Sodom. It was revealed to Abraham that God would destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their sinful actions. Abraham asked God if fifty righteous people can be found in the cities, whether God would still destroy them. Abraham posed the question; shall not the judge of all also be just? God responded that if fifty righteous people were found he would not destroy the cities. But Abraham continued to wrestle with God asking what if 45 righteous people were found, then 40, 30, 20, and then finally 10. God responded that if ten righteous people were found he would not destroy the cities (Genesis 18:16-33). The Jewish tradition interprets Genesis 32 to mean humans can wrestle with God and win if they are wrestling in defense of justice and compassion for the stranger.

Wiesel even argues that the Biblical story of the ethic of obedience to God (the akedah or the Binding of Isaac) was a story of Abraham's wrestling with God.

> Wiesel wonders whether the test of Abraham with Isaac was perhaps a 'double edged test.' 'God subjected Abraham to it, yet at the same time Abraham forced it on God. As though Abraham had said, 'I defy You, Lord. I shall submit to Your will, but let us see whether You shall go to the end, whether You shall remain passive and

> remain silent when the life of my son – who is also Your son – is at stake!' And God changed his mind and relented.' (qtd. in Alice Eckardt, 5, 1-06)

In this Wiesel maintains that the Judaic tradition has always been willing to wrestle with God if God was showing a lack of justice toward creation.

The rabbinic tradition of the Talmud is a further exemplification of this idea that you can wrestle with God and win if you do so in the name of compassion. But it seems no event in Judaic history has required more wrestling than the Holocaust. The model of God's Ambiguity: Judaism as wrestling with God is represented in the work of Elie Wiesel. Elie Wiesel makes the claim that God failed the Jews at Auschwitz. He believes that God abandoned the Jews, breaking the covenant. But, Wiesel says even though God broke the covenant the Jews chose to remain faithful to it.

> Either You are our partner in history, or You are not. If You are, do Your share; if You are not, we consider ourselves free of past commitments. Since you chose to break the Covenant, so be it. And yet, and yet…we went on believing, hoping, invoking His name…In other words, we did not give up on Him…For this is the essence of being Jewish: never to give up – never to yield to despair…When all hope is gone, Jews invent new hopes. (Wiesel, 1979, p.147-148)

Wiesel puts God on trial for failing to fulfill the demands of the covenant required of him. To Wiesel that does not mean rejecting the beliefs or practices, but rather wrestling with God while maintaining the practices of the religion. Wiesel never denies the existence of God, rather he questions whether God was just. "Where was God? But I'm asking the question from within the faith, not from outside the faith. If I didn't believe, where would

be the problem? But if you do believe, then you have painful questions" (Wiesel & O'Connor, 1990, p. 2).

The theological conundrum arising from the Holocaust is how to live with a who is either cruel or indifferent. The answer for post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers is to embrace the Talmudic and Hasidic traditions of wrestling or arguing with God.

> The Talmudic way is the way of Abraham and of Jacob – or arguing and wrestling with God and man and winning. For the Talmudic tradition sanctifies the capacity to doubt and to criticize. "The wonder of the Talmud is its tough-minded claims in behalf of the intellect, not in search, but in the service, of God" (Neusner, 1973, p. xviii). God is founded in the "thrust and parry of argument." Talmudic debate is a ritual for experiencing God through the questions. And yet, although the Talmudic scholar is vigorous and bold in his questions, his questioning is never divorced from faith. Faith and audacity, as we have suggested…paradoxically go together…This same spirit of *chutzpah* (sic) [or audacity] can be found in Hasidic Judaism. (Fasching, deChant, Lantigua, 2011, p. 216)

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What follows is a series of vignettes of my own experiences and the survivors' experiences. Chapter Three contextualizes the ascent of my despair by describing events occurring in my personal life along with the interviews that profoundly affected me. The goal in using these vignettes is to help the reader understand the rise of my own despair until my own identity shatters and must be re-constructed.

CHAPTER THREE

IDENTITY CROSSROADS: THE CRISIS OF CONVERGING NARRATIVES

Pregnancy and the Promise of Life (Author's Narrative)

Spring 2008

My radio blares as I pull away from my daughter's school. This is the last week of her third grade year and she has done so well. Belting out the lyrics to "The Sweet Escape" by Gwen Stefani with the radio I think about how proud I am of my daughter. My chest physically hurts as I think of that beautiful face smiling at me and signing "I Love You" by holding up her thumb, pointer finger, and pinky finger folding down the two center fingers, as she turns to walk into the school. I feel the familiar rumbling going on in my belly as my unborn twins remind me that it is time to eat. I reach down smiling as I gently caress my belly. I barely hear the phone ring through the music.

"Hello," I say.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" my husband asks.

"Great, but I have to eat," I say.

"Just checking," he says.

"Don't forget we have Jacob Kelly's doctor's appointment today," I say.

"That's right. What are they doing? Is it just a check-up, or shots?"

"I don't remember, whatever they do at a two year appointment," I respond.

"I hate shots," he says.

"I will see you there," I say, not allowing him to escape the appointment.

After we hang up I sigh and rub my belly again. The sun warms my face through the car window, making my whole body feel warm. I leave my hand on my babies hoping they can feel my sense of contentment. I turn onto campus. I begin thinking about what I will be lecturing about, running through my notes in my mind for a lecture I have done over and over. This is one of the more difficult topics of the semester. I have been asked so many times before how I can research and study life after death and not be depressed by the topic. My response remains the same. It is fulfilling and uplifting. I tell my students from the first day of class, "In order to learn how to live we have to learn how to die," just as my mentor Dr. Darrell Fasching told his students at the beginning of each semester. We move through topics ranging from near death experiences to how different religions understand the after death experience. Throughout the semester we discuss difficult aspects of dealing with death, but today, this seems to be the most difficult for the students to grasp, every semester. The lecture deals with suicide and the art of dying.

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Spring 2005

Sitting in the front row of the 400 person lecture hall, notebook and pen poised for action. I mouth the words to myself as I listen to Dr. Fasching giving the lecture I have heard him give again and again on "Religion, Suicide, and the Art of Dying." As his graduate assistant for over two years I pride myself on knowing the lecture material well. This

semester there are well over 300 students in the class. I take notes every single class hoping to model the behavior expected of the students.

> A. Alvarez, in his excellent book on suicide, *The Savage God*, recounts his own attempt at suicide as his marriage and his life began to fall apart. In this situation a phrase from the unhappy moments of his youth, 'I wish I were dead,' came back to him and he realized almost with surprise, that he now meant it…A kind of obsessive calm came over him as a plan slowly gestated. That moment was a kind of conversion, a kind of religious surrender of will to powers greater than himself which brought with it a transformation of values. It was not only his marriage, he says, but his whole life which needed changing and which he had decided to do away with. 'No one is promiscuous in his way of dying,' he tells us. 'A man who has decided to hang himself will never jump in front of a train.... I can vouch, at least, for that. I built up to the act carefully and for a long time, with a kind of blank pertinacity. It was the one constant focus of my life, making everything else irrelevant, a diversion' (Alvarez, 1970, p. 267-268).

While the power point slides projected onto the screen carry the Alvarez quotes so the students can follow along, Dr. Fasching recites them only glancing every once in a while to change the slides.

> Like anyone undergoing a religious conversion, Alvarez found himself with a new orientation which gave a sense of direction to his actions and a new scale of values meant to reinforce that direction. He was like a man who had passed over to another world in order to meet his destiny. That destiny was neither jumping in front of a

train nor hanging himself but an excess of liquor and sleeping pills -- and then oblivion.

Dr. Fasching pauses to let the impact of his words reach the students.

Three days later he awoke in the hospital. He slept through most of the fourth day and then wept through most of the fifth. The police came, since suicide was still a crime (in England in the early 1960s) but they were anxious to write it off as an accident. He was haunted by violent repetitive dreams. In one he dreamt he was being hunted down by a creature who seized him and shook him 'as a dog shakes a rat.... I felt I had tasted in my dreams the death which had been denied me in my coma' (Alvarez, 1970, p. 278).

I hear shuffling around the room.

Alvarez goes on to say, 'We all expect something of death, even if it's only damnation. But all I had got was oblivion.... I felt cheated. Why had I been so sure of finding some kind of answer?... **Months later I began to understand that I had had my answer, after all**. The despair that had led me to try to kill myself had been pure and unadulterated, like the final unanswerable despair a child feels, with no before or after.... **I gradually saw that I had been using the wrong language.... I no longer thought of myself as unhappy; instead, I had 'problems,' which is an optimistic way of putting it**, since problems imply solutions, where unhappiness is merely a condition of life which you must live with like the weather.... **I didn't much care whether I was happy or unhappy...and that in itself is already the beginning of happiness'** (Alvarez, 1970, p. 280-282).

> **It seems ludicrous now to ... have had to go almost the whole way into death in order to grow up**.... Nothing has been quite the same since I discovered for myself, in my own body and on my own nerves, that death is simply an end, a dead end, no more, no less. And I wonder if that piece of knowledge isn't in itself a form of death. **After all, the youth who swallowed the sleeping pills and the man who survived are so utterly different that someone or something must have died. Before the pills was another life, another person altogether, whom I scarcely recognized and don't much like....'** (Alvarez, 1970, p. 282-283).

Dr. Fasching pauses and then says:

> You see as with other examples this semester he needed to get rid of his ego self but misunderstood that need. In the end the someone or something that died was that ego self. For anyone who spends his life studying the variety of religious experience, it is clear that attempted suicide was, for Alvarez, a rite of initiation, **a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood**. Such rites typically involve a ritual passage which symbolizes the death of the child and his or her rebirth as an adult member of the tribe. In a world in which we no longer have formal collective rituals of identity transformation**, suicide is one way in which consciousness is forced to catch up with the experience of the body**. It may be one of the most dangerous ways, but all rites of passage are dangerous. It is in fact the way which must be **undergone by a self which has resisted the identity transformations which the journey through life requires**.

An older woman sitting down the row from me is nodding her head along with Dr. Fasching.

> It is clear that in the midst of his emotional turmoil, Alvarez was not able to correctly decipher the erotic and fascinating lure of death as a spiritual demand. The quest for death clearly took on the aura of a ritual quest for transformation but it was only after he nearly succeeded in taking his own (biological) life that **it became clear to him that the death experience that he thirsted for was the death of the self, a spiritual-psychological transformation of identity. The spiritual art of dying was nearly aborted by his physical death**. His inarticulate fantasies of death were but an experiential/mystical hunger to encounter the ultimate power of life and death, the really real (whatever that be) - a hunger to be transformed by reality. That was the experience he finally found, in his own way, not in the oblivion of the near-death coma but in the twilight zone between waking and dreaming in the days which followed.

All of the sudden I noticed the room was silent, everyone was focused. The students closest to me had the power points printed and were scribbling notes on them furiously.

> Suicide intervention is not a job for technicians and experts but for the spiritually gifted, experienced in the wisdom and transformative language of the soul or self -- for those already experienced in the art of dying who understand the human need to experience death, here and now. This need is consonant with one of the most pervasive themes in the history of religions, namely that **the art of living consists, paradoxically, in the art of dying**. The person who would live life fully must be willing to follow the path of anxiety and despair into the great abyss where one must "let go" and will the spiritual death of the self. As Alvarez' experience testifies,

without the experience of death life becomes impossible. But when spiritual death is experienced, then life is possible even in the face of death.

I smile as Dr. Fasching finishes the lecture. Watching the students packing up dazed by what the Professor has just told them I think to myself, this is one of my favorite lectures he gives. (All lecture notes printed in Fasching, 2001, p. 109-112).

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My first semester in the Master's Program in Religious Studies, Spring 2003, I took a course called Religious and Psychosocial Perspectives of Human Suffering with Dr. Sandra Garcia. While I knew a little about the Holocaust prior to the course it was in this course I began actual research on the genocide. I eventually wrote my Master's Thesis on radical religious movements and the negotiation required by law enforcement to interact with them.

I applied to and was accepted into the Criminology Doctoral Program. Through the program I wanted to teach governmental officials and law enforcement agencies how to negotiate with non-normative marginalized religious movements. After attempting to negotiate a qualitative dissertation in a dominantly quantitative department I spoke with the Graduate Director and decided to complete the Master's degree instead. My Master's Project in Criminology extended the work I had done on my Master's Thesis in Religious Studies. I created a training manual directed toward law enforcement to aid in interaction with religious movements that were marginalized.

I began searching for a Doctoral Program that would be a better fit. I had studied religions that had been oppressed, such as the Branch Davidians (with David Koresh in Waco, TX), the Family International, People's Temple (with Jim Jones in Guyana), among

others. I also studied people that were oppressed because they were members of a religion, such as Jews during the Holocaust, as well as studying the effect of the White Power movement today on Jews. I wanted to continue studying people and religions that were oppressed and silenced and how to change the societal normative structures to recognize the need for inclusivity.

I spoke with my Religious Studies mentor, Dr. Fasching, and he recommended I meet with Dr. Carolyn Ellis in the Communication Department. Between Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 I took a few courses in the Communication Department to familiarize myself with the program and specifically to work with Dr. Ellis and see if she and I thought it was a good fit. We both did and I began the program in Summer 2007.

As I began studying in Communication I thought I wanted to focus my dissertation on fundamentalist street preachers. Because of my interest in dominant structures oppression of "outsiders" or "others," I found their confrontational evangelism interesting. However, after interviewing a number of the preachers and spending time in the community I found it was simply an attention getting tactic to make the students angry and push them to go home and look in their Christian Bible for answers. After completing a number of course projects on various aspects of the street preachers I decided it was not what I thought or expected.

While in search of another dissertation project I completed my Comprehensive Exams Summer 2009. Feeling stuck I spoke with Dr. Fasching who proposed I turn to writing my dissertation on a project we had discussed working on after I finished my Master's degree. The project examined the Left Behind series, which promotes a healthy dose of violence against all who do not believe the same way LaHayean Christianity does.

But as I wrote my prospectus and began to narrow my purpose, it actually led me back to the Holocaust at a serendipitous time. Just as my prospectus led me to looking at the role of the Jews in LaHayean Christianity I had the opportunity to take a course related to the Holocaust. Even though I had taken Communicating Grief, Loss, and Illness with Dr. Ellis in Fall 2006 I took the course a second time in Fall 2009 with all this in mind. Dr. Ellis had begun interviewing Holocaust survivors that Spring and in the class graduate students would have the chance to participate. I felt this project was a perfect fit for me.

Summer 2009

"How have you been?" my professor, Dr. Carolyn Ellis, asks me.

"Fairly well," I say.

"How's your mom?"

"She's doing really well right now."

"How are you doing with the reading?"

"Pretty well, considering the content," I say.

Dr. Ellis begins teaching a course called Communicating Illness, Grief and Loss, which I have taken once before. This time the focus of the course is on Holocaust survivors. Throughout the course we will be interviewing Holocaust survivors and discussing various relationships between interviewer and interviewees, the loss they have experienced, and how their understanding may have changed over the years. A colleague and I have been offered the opportunity to be two of the three student interviewers.

Over the summer we have been reading some memoirs to prepare for our experiences. I have done some prior research on the Holocaust and suffering, but not from this perspective.

"What is amazing to me is how hopeful most of the survivors sound in the memoirs," I say.

"That's been my experience so far interviewing them as well," she says. She began interviewing in the Spring and Summer.

"I just thought I'd check in and see how you were and how you were handling the material. Your colleague is having some difficulty with the content," she says.

"He is?"

"Well, he hasn't read much Holocaust material before, or studied the Holocaust in depth. I am actually not sure he realizes how it is affecting him, but he has lost quite a bit of weight," she tells me.

"Uh oh, that's not good news. He was already thin," I say.

"I know, he tells me he is doing okay, but he has lost somewhere around 20 pounds or more in the last few months."

"Wow, that's rough. The memoirs and stories are so hard to read even if you have studied the material before," I say.

"Right, and of course anyone reading Holocaust memoirs prepares themselves for some amount of emotional trauma," she says.

"Yes, and some of the memoirs are more emotional than others. Even though I have studied the Holocaust before it has never been through memoir so it is hard to read. But I think I am doing okay," I say.

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Living between cultures results in 'seeing' double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives

> simultaneously renders those cultures transparent. Removed from that culture's center you glimpse the sea in which you've been immersed but to which you were oblivious, no longer seeing the world the way you were enculturated to see it. (qtd in Keating, 2006, p. 8)

January, 2010

"Baruch HaShem," I hear the words and something inside me stirs. Baruch HaShem, I find myself throughout the day using these words to pray. Why? What about those words, Baruch HaShem, do I find so moving in Hebrew that I have found myself embracing them? What in my soul and spirit moves, warms, feels strengthened when I repeat these words, Baruch HaShem, Baruch HaShem.

"My teacher might want to meet with you mom," my daughter says getting into the car after school.

"Okay, what happened?"

"She was telling us about how she lost her glasses over the weekend and that she was so thankful that she found them this morning," my daughter pauses.

"Okay," I say glancing over.

"Well, I said 'Baruch HaShem!' Really loudly. She looked at me strangely and I said, 'It means Blessed be the Name in Hebrew.' She just smiled and said 'Thank you Kya,' but my guess is the teacher will want to talk to you."

I start laughing. My daughter attends a private Christian school, yet learns more at home about Judaism, Paganism, and African religions than she does about Christianity. She does a fairly delicate dance whenever she is at school. This is one in a long list of examples of my daughter integrating not only the fragmented language she hears from me, but the

messages of the survivors I interview into her everyday life and sometimes she takes them into spheres where they aren't always welcome. In her mind we are all in this together, every religion, every race, every human and we must operate that way.

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Promise of Life and a Happy Childhood (Victims' Narratives)

"…meaning is possible even in spite of suffering" (Frankl, 117).

Spring 2010
Ella Schlanger

Weaving in between the tables, my two colleagues, our professor, and I hand out flyers and explain to the Holocaust survivors at the Annual Survivors Luncheon the research we are doing. The event is jointly hosted by Generations After and the St. Pete Holocaust Museum. The representatives from the Museum agreed to allow us to attend and present our research to the survivors as long as we are cautious in our approach. By cautious the representative explained we could ask the survivors but if they declined we could not continue to push or encourage them to be interviewed. The goal was to protect the survivors from researchers who may be more interested in the research project than the best interest of the person. This is not the research style our professor taught our team. She made the best interest of the survivor primary which is why we were allowed to attend the event.

The survivors are connected by their experiences, even if they don't know each other. Some survivors I approach have been interviewed many times in the past, by the Shoah Institute, the St. Pete Holocaust Museum, among others. I approach a table with two women and one man sitting quietly, companionably together. I ask if they have heard about our research. The woman named Lily says they have and that she and her husband Arthur have been interviewed many times.

"She is the one that needs to be interviewed," she says pointing to the woman next to her (later I found out her name is Ella). The woman shakes her head. "She has never told her story you know," Lily tells me.

"Why should I? I live with the memories. I don't want to think of those awful memories more than I already do. Why should I?"

"Because they make other people remember," Lily says to her then looks at me. "She separated the people's clothes outside the gas chamber."

"Enough people have told those awful stories, I don't need to tell mine," the woman says shaking her head again.

I nod my head and say, "I understand." I slip away and look for other survivors to talk with. A few moments later I pass the table again and the woman calls me back over.

"I have a question for you," she says.

"Yes ma'am?"

"Are you Jewish?"

"No ma'am."

"Why? Why do you do this? Isn't this depressing? Who wants to hear these stories?"

I paused and then said, "Because of my daughter. She is 10. I look at the world around me and I realize we haven't gotten that far. I have to believe that humans are capable of a better future. But to do that we have to continue telling these stories so children know the horror that humans are capable of so they are willing to stand up against injustice."

We sat in silence for almost a full minute then she says, "Okay. I have never told my story before. But I will tell my story to you."

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Pre-War Experiences
Ella Schlanger

I leave class at 1:00pm hoping to make my meeting with Ella on time. I run through a fast food drive through on the way. Ella and I ate together at her house at her pre-interview, but I don't want to assume she will have food today. Just in case I eat light.

When I get to Ella's house she opens the door and asks, "Have you eaten?"

"I did," I say, but seeing her face fall I follow up with, "not much though."

"Good, you know what I have?" she asks smiling at me. "I made egg salad."

"One of my favorites." Walking in I notice she has put a bowl of grapes and cherries on the table already.

"Make yourself a sandwich."

We are in the kitchen together pulling out bread, egg salad, and knives. "I also bought this pastry when I went to the store this morning. I wanted to have fresh bread for you," she says placing a beautiful cherry pastry on the counter.

"Thank you so much," I say.

"Make yourself two," she says watching me carefully to be sure I am getting enough to eat. "I know you are busy and don't have time to eat. I'm not even sure why I made it," she says gesturing toward the egg salad. "I just love you and thought you would enjoy it."

"Thank you," I say, my eyes watering. "I feel that you and I have a connection."

"Me too. I don't know why. I know we don't really know each other well, but I feel it," she says.

We move from the kitchen into the dining room and sit down companionably next to each other. She reaches for a cherry and I say, "You told me about the woman that did the

automatic writing for you and that you believed you have been Jewish and Catholic in different lives. I started thinking more about that and the way we understand religion and God. I thought maybe we could talk a little about your experiences and about the way you understand God," I say to her. She nods.

"Maybe we could start by you reminding me a little of how religious your family was before the war."

"We weren't very religious. My mother was kind of rebellious, but we were Orthodox. We kept kosher, but we weren't really Orthodox. My grandfather was Orthodox. My cousins were starting to go out with people who weren't Jewish, which I think is good. I think people should marry who they love," she says.

"But your grandfather was Orthodox?"

"Yes, I think people get more religious as they get older. I remember my grandfather asking why my mother was sending me to school. My mother said, 'You had eight children and you sent all of them to school.' But he had gotten more religious and didn't think I should be going to school."

"Do you remember holidays before the war?"

"I remember it was Passover when the Hungarians came in. It was just after Passover and they came in and said, 'You got ten minutes to get out of this house!' The Hungarians took us to a schoolyard then to a brick factory for four or five weeks and then we were taken to Auschwitz," she says. (Lockler, 8, 2010).

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K. Zuchovicki

Catherine “Kitty” Sharf Zuchovicki is a Holocaust survivor. She did not survive a concentration camp, or a work camp. She did not survive as a hidden child living in a hole under the ground for months at a time. But she is a survivor. For much of her life her parents told her she was not a Holocaust survivor and should not want to be associated with those who were. They told her this because they felt she should be grateful that she was never in a concentration camp. She should feel blessed that she did not have to experience the atrocities that those who survived camps did. Yet Kitty did survive. She survived the painful experiences of degradation, loss of dignity, and separation from her parents. She survived the traumatic experience of being a child and not understanding why other children are not willing to play with you, share with you, be your friend, and are amused by your despair. She lived through constantly moving as a child, never having a stable environment, wondering why she was being ousted and what it even meant to be Jewish, and then survived tuberculosis. No, Kitty may not have survived a concentration camp, but nonetheless she is a survivor of the Holocaust.

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Pre-War Religious Experiences

Kitty Zuchovicki

Sitting at Kitty’s dining room table I glance around the dining room living room combo. The china cabinet behind me holds dishes, candles, and a picture of her mother. On the wall she has pictures of her grandchildren. The counter between the dining area and the kitchen holds a menorah. The living room, to my right, has an “L” shaped couch around a coffee table. Kitty and her husband Saverio are talking in the office/bedroom off to the side of the dining room.

Kitty joins me at the table, “Would you like anything to drink?”

“No thank you,” I say.

“Where would you like to begin?” she asks me.

“We have had so many conversations about God, your experiences during the Holocaust, the future of humanity, and what you see as the job of young children, that I thought we could try to put all of it together.”

“Ok, so do you want me to tell a story or do you want to ask me questions?”

“I thought I would start by asking some questions and you could answer and tell me stories,” I say.

“Ok, good.”

“Can you start by telling me a little about what your life was like before the war? What your family was like?”

“Oh, it was wonderful. I was an only child. This was around 1930 and my parents thought it was better not to have any more children, so I was the only one. We would go on the weekends to different places, and I remember going to the woods and collecting mushrooms and nuts. Such a beautiful time. Our lives very much revolved around the family. My parents loved each other very much. I learned much about how to be a wife and mother from my early family experiences. My parents also had many good friends. What else would you like to know?”

“What do you remember about your early religious life?”

“Well, my parents weren’t religious at all. My mother made sure we did the High Holy Days and Passover, but that was because she was very focused on tradition.”

“Ok, what about God? Do you remember any teaching about God?”

"I was never taught about a God that separates people. I had friends that were Jewish and non-Jewish, and we celebrated Passover which is part of Christianity too, so I saw a connection there. I always felt that there was an energy, that we are all together. 'It is just like the languages: you speak different languages and it means the same. You feel like praying to a God. It doesn't matter how you call him; it is God, whatever it is (Lockler, 2009).' There is even a Golden Rule in every religion that you should not do unto others what you do not want them to do to you. So I see a connection between us all."

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Pre-War Religious Experiences

R. Hammond

"Ms. Hammond, can you tell me when you were born?" I ask, beginning the interview.

"I was born December 25, 1925."

"Thank you, and can you spell your name for me?"

"R-e-n-e-e H-a-m-m-o-n-d"

"Can you tell me a little about your early childhood?"

"I had a happy childhood. My family lived in a comfortable home on the outskirts of Uzhorod, a city with a big Jewish population. I went to a non-Jewish gymnazium until 1941 when the law came out that Jews couldn't go to non-Jewish schools. I finished at a Hebrew gymnasium." Renee, at almost 85 years old, speaks very clearly but with a thick accent.

"Can you tell me what religious life was like in your home as a child?" I ask.

"We were Orthodox Jews. We had two sets of dishes, ate kashrut, my father went to synagogue, my brother was bar mitzvahed," she said.

"Can you give me an example of a religious holiday in your home? Or a typical Shabbat?"

"Well, on Friday my mother would prepare a big dinner. She made things like cholent, kugel, and baked coffee cakes and desserts. My father went to synagogue and after he came home we would have dinner together. Then Saturday me and my girlfriends would go to a movie. But Orthodox Jews cannot handle money on the Sabbath so I would give my girlfriend the money Friday before Sabbath started," Renee says chuckling.

"Were your friends Jewish?"

"Not all of them. Sometimes it was hard because my friends that were Jewish weren't Orthodox so I had to be careful not to go to their house and eat something with butter on it after eating meat at home. But their families were kind and would remember that."

"What family lived in the house with you?"

"My older brother, me, my younger sister, and our parents," she says.

"What other early memories do you have about holidays at home?"

"I remember having the last Seder before we were forced out of our home," she stops talking her eyes filling with tears.

I give her a minute before asking, "Do you remember being taught anything specifically about God when you were young?"

"Well, there is one God, and we pray to the one God, God created the world in seven days and we are expected to follow the commandments and follow the prayers." She pauses and then says, "It was a very natural thing to me. A way of life. If you were bad you would be punished."

(R. Hammond, personal communication, February 24, 2012).

Impending End of Promise and Hope (Convergence of Narratives)

Ella Schlanger
During the war
Fall 2010

After a few moments Ella says, "I was placed on crematorium detail. The people that were taken to the crematorium all of the stuff they had with them was placed in big piles. We sorted the clothes, shoes, blankets, anything people still had with them. We didn't know at the time that the people who work outside the crematoria were killed every three months."

Ella goes over to her desk and gets a piece of yellow legal paper. She folds it in half and sits down. "See, when you come into the camp you come down this drive and there are pits on the right side and then at the end of the drive there is a shower building and a crematoria on the right and then down around the corner there is another crematoria. I was originally taken to Lager "A," but after a few weeks this German soldier decides he doesn't want us going back and forth each day to the barracks because we are too tired. So we get moved to the barrack separated from the crematorium only by a wire fence." She has been sketching on the notepaper drawing an image of the section of the camp she was in.

"Our group of girls got lucky because one of the German soldiers had a crush on one of the girls. Every time one of the other soldiers came to take us away he fought to keep us which is why we weren't killed after the three months was up. So a couple of months later the Germans were cleaning out the children's camp. There were children screaming everywhere. And we asked, 'What the hell are you guys doing? It stinks so badly! And what is all the screaming?' They had brought the children to the crematorium in a truck that

lifted up and dumped them alive into the fire at night. I will never forget their screams and the smell of the burning flesh." She stops, sucking in a deep breath and then shuddering. We sit in silence a moment before she speaks again.

"I was there a few more months before I was taken to GrosRosen by train, where I worked in an ammunition factory. From there we were marched through the freezing cold and snow. My hands and feet froze. My little finger and these," she says pointing at the pinky finger and two fingers next to it, "turned a brownish color. I pushed on this one at one point and stuck a hole in it so you could see the bone."

"Wow, I am surprised you didn't lose them," I say.

"I know. I don't really know how they healed up. I still have pain. They marched us to the men's camp, Buchenwald. We were only there a day or two before we were put back on trains and moved to Mauthausen. There were women dressed in uniforms to watch us. They were brutal. They beat us, broke bones, and killed. Those women were removed because they were so brutal. I was there about two weeks."

"This is during the time of the death march?" I ask.

"Yes, they were just moving us place to place. After the two weeks at Mauthausen we were taken by train to Bergen Belsen. That was awful. There were stacks of corpses two and three feet high. We got liberated from Bergen Belsen by the English."

"I think I am finished," Ella says quietly but with a sense of finality. She wipes the tears from her cheeks, her eyes still glistening in the light.

I wait almost a full minute before I turn to Jane, our videographer, and nod. Jane shuts the equipment off. The last twenty minutes of our interview has been emotionally

charged. While Ella's story is not complete she has told all she can tell for now, maybe ever. I gently reach over and touch her hand.

She looks up at me, "You know, I did that for you."

I nod, my eyes filling with tears, "Thank you."

My stomach feels tight, my body buzzes as though an electrical current runs through it. The imagery Ella shared comes in waves, watching her mother get into a different line not knowing that was the last time she would see her, separating the clothes of people being led into the gas chambers, screaming babies being thrown into an open fire. The images haunt me…and I didn't see them.

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"In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice" (Frankl, 117).

George Jerzy Turlo
November 2010

Walking into the Clubhouse of the Condominium complex I see my interviewee right away. He must be 6'5", towering over me, his silver beard and broad shoulders making him appear distinguished. He gently shakes my hand and we walk into the Library together.

At our pre-interview I found out that this interviewee was not a Jew, but a Righteous Gentile. Righteous Gentiles are those who hid or protected the Jews in some way during the Holocaust. The University of South Florida Library, the project our team is interviewing through, is primarily interviewing Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. I have chosen to go forward with the interview for two reasons. First, I was shocked by his story and felt his experiences needed to be documented. While he has written a book, it has not reached a wide audience. Second, he shared with me a very personal piece of information, that he had

been diagnosed and was in the earliest stages of Alzheimer's and needed to get the story on tape while he could still remember. In talking to him I would have never guessed, but he said he could feel it. He knew when his memory lapsed. His admission to me made me study the pieces of the story he told me at the pre-interview and pay careful attention to the book that was written in 2004 prior to the on-set of Alzheimer's.

As our formal interview began, this man began pouring out his story. I attempted to ask a question once, get his attention once, and again ask a question. When he broke a second and I asked the question it was clear he began losing his place. I realized then that this interview would need to be on his terms. I worked diligently to get him back into the flow of his story. He realized he was telling the story out of order and I assured him he had taken us back and given us more detail to the story, and that we were right on track. That helped him continue the story.

Even after hearing his story at the pre-interview and having read his book Noble Hearts , my mouth becomes dry as he talks about the blood and brain tissue of his best friend being all over him after a bomb went off close to them. My stomach rolls as he tells the story of the mother walking with her two children only to have what he assumes was a Byelorussian police officer in a black uniform bayonet the older child, shoot the mother in the mouth and then as she fell, "…picked up the screaming baby from the ground, lifted it up and with one swipe inserted it on the iron picket fence that surrounded a little park square" (Turlo, 2004, p. 96). He goes on to say that his mother tells him this was the most terrible thing they were seeing and they should never forget.

George Turlo tells a story of trying to save a Jewish boy by distracting the soldier's attention so the boy would have a chance to run away. The soldier ends up shooting the

Jewish boy in the stomach and taking both the boy and Turlo to the edge of a mass grave. After the soldier lined people up, guns are fired but somehow the man next to Turlo pushes him and he falls in the grave, landing under a pile of dead bodies. The Germans begin firing into the mass grave at anything moving so Turlo remains still. After much time the Germans move on assuming everyone in the grave is dead. Turlo begins the treacherous journey of making his way out of the grave. As a child, approximately eight years old, he has to build a ladder of dead bodies to get out of the grave. But in order to make the ladder he has to sit and wait until the bodies are not as pliable (his father taught him about rigor mortis and that it set in after around six hours).

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After reading George Turlo's book, having the pre-interview and the interview with him I had become so immersed in his story that I could be sitting somewhere doing something completely unrelated to the interviewing project, maybe grading or hanging out with my kids, and all the sudden the images of being in the pit with dead bodies would fill my mind. Mr. Turlo had hoped to see another book written about his experiences. I thought about asking him if he would like to work together to create an account. My hesitation stemmed from my need to complete my dissertation prior to taking on another fairly major writing project and concern about his claim about Alzheimer's. But when I began thinking about discussing it with him the following is a fictional piece I wrote based on the images that flashed through my mind as I thought about all he said.

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Personal Fiction Based on George Turlo's Account

My nails dig into the dirt, my right foot pushes into the wall, slipping my foot lands on the face of a dead woman. I try again. Digging my fingers into the wall, I try to climb the side. I fall again landing on another body. It is dark, and the moonlight only illuminates the sides of the grave. I know what I must do to get out, but my mind keeps willing it away.

Turning my back to the wall I have just tried to climb, I slide down some. Squatting, my body shaking from the sobs overtaking me, and trying to hold them in to remain silent, I squint to try and see which bodies are closest to me. Glancing up at the rim of the hole, I try to guess how many bodies I will have to stack. I gently crouch and take a step forward. Gingerly I move my hand over the body directly in front of me. I feel for the arm and leg, grasping each I pull the body toward me. It slides a little and then stops. I pull harder and it moves a little closer. I step around the body lift one side and push it over so it is now against the wall.

Taking a deep breath I turn and take a step away from the wall reaching out blindly feeling for another body small enough that I can lift it. I feel what has to be a child and pull again moving slowly, pulling the body behind me toward the wall. Once I am close enough I move to the other side of the body and lean under it to lift the body on top of the first. The body rolls on top of the first but immediately starts to slide off. I grab the clothes and pull to leverage the body back on top of the first.

I look to the rim of the hole again and realize I will probably only need one more, but to get it I have to venture farther into the grave and the dark. Arms shaking from exertion I turn to step back into the blackness. Feeling only with my hands I come across the arm of a body small enough. I pull but cannot move the body. Feeling farther I realize it is lodged under another body that is too large for me to move. I continue forward. Another step

forward and I find a body small enough. I turn and begin dragging the body back to the stack slowly. I push with all my force to get the body high enough that it is stacked on the other two.

I carefully place my foot on the first body and begin trying to use the human ladder I created. The bodies are caving under the weight of my body. I take a step to the side and crouch down knowing I will have to wait. Covering my face with my hands I begin to cry again.

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At the time that I interviewed George Turlo I was not fully aware of the profound impact his story had on me. I interviewed him in 2011 and yet did not realize his story affected the questioning of my faith. I didn't recognize his story as one more part of my willingness to even separate myself from the faith and religion of my family and what I had known, subjecting myself to potential chastisement by my parents, isolation, and rejection.

> Nepantleras are threshold people: they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system. This refusal is not easy; nepantleras must be willing to open themselves to personal risks and potential woundings which include, but are not limited to, self-division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusations of disloyalty. (Keating, 2006, p. 6)

Loss of Faith

I was raised in the Christian faith. My mother and father took me to church and I went to a private Christian school. My mother loves to tell stories about me being a little

girl and the connection she believes I had with Jesus. She says when I was three or four I would ask a question out loud, something like why do cats have pads on the bottoms of their paws, then I would close my eyes and wait. A few minutes later I would open my eyes and say "Oh, I see," and then go on playing. My mother was convinced Jesus was answering my questions.

She especially loves to tell the story of me breaking my arm in fourth grade. I was on a piece of gym equipment that I climbed up by myself but then told my coach I didn't feel like I could make it down. He told me everyone else had and I could too. I jumped. I landed with my right wrist bent under so my hand was facing my arm, breaking both bones. My arm at the wrist was bent like an "S." I was taken to the hospital and my arm was placed in a traction device to pull the hand and arm apart to set the bones correctly.

My mother says I was talking about Jesus the entire time. I was telling the nurses about Jesus and how he was protecting me. My mother says near the end of the procedure she asked if I was okay and I told her yes that Jesus had told me that's all there was there would be no more.

When I told my parents I wanted to get my Master's degree in Religious Studies their concern wasn't whether I would be able to find a job, my parents were concerned that I would lose my faith. This is a common attitude among Christian families, that exposure to other religions may persuade their children to abandon their faith.

As I mentioned earlier, in my first semester I took Religious and Psychosocial Perspectives of Human Suffering. During the course we read books such as Evil and Suffering, edited by Jacob Neusner, Night and Dawn by Elie Wiesel, Love In Action, by Thich Nhat Hanh, among others. We studied events like the Holocaust and the religious

perspective on the event. The course exposed me to forms of suffering I had never really studied.

In the same semester I took World Religions in an Age of Terrorism. Through this course I was exposed to externally violent religious movements. I began to question why religion was used to respond to tragedy as it was. For example, the majority of Christians around the world did nothing while Jews were rounded up into ghettos and then concentration and extermination camps and killed shocked me. Beyond that the majority of Christians were willing to turn their head because they believed the Jews to be responsible for killing Jesus of Nazareth was more horrific to me.

Alongside studying the Holocaust, as I began looking at the religious movements such as Army of God I was sickened by what the so-called Christians were willing to do. Detailed instructions on their website provided anyone who wanted it information on how to bomb an abortion clinic, and a hit list of abortion doctors.

I wondered how the God they believed in could be the same God I believed in. Then I realized they weren't the same God. Those communities envisioned a God that looked like them, not that all of creation was made in the image of a divine without image.

> In a holy community, however, ultimate reality (God, Sunyata, Tao, etc.) is not understood as created in the image of human beings but rather, human beings are thought to be created in the image of an ultimate reality without image…If God or the holy is created in 'our image,' then those who are like us (the privileged group who is doing the defining – for example, white males) are human, and all who are different are less than human. However, if we are created in the image of a God/holy without image, then it is not possible that some human image (ideal or stereotype)

> more closely approximates the image of God/holy than others. On the contrary, the holy is mirrored in our diversity. All are equal by virtue of being created in the image of an ultimate reality that cannot be imaged. (DeChant, Fasching 299-300)

The challenge for me was to try to explain to my family how my image of God changed. But, after many heated arguments I decided it was not worth continuing to try to show them that my conception of God had shifted. By the time I graduated with my Master's degree in Religious Studies and began my work in Criminology I still called myself a Christian, but even the claim felt forced.

When I began my doctoral work in Communication and was interviewing the Street Preachers it reinforced my belief that at the very least much of Christianity still harbored belief that they should be the dominant religion. I took offense to the people who claimed their way was the right way. I took offense…take offense at those who believe they know what the divine knows.

When the Holocaust project came up I dove into the project reading every memoir I could find, setting myself up so I could understand the people I had the chance to interview. The more I read I questioned any god that could allow the suffering of creation, the unjustified suffering of humanity. The more I read the more I wavered.

One of the books for Dr. Garcia's course was Rabbi Harold Kushner's <u>When Bad Things Happen to Good People</u> (1981). His image of God was one I could, on the surface, accept. Kushner's son died at the age of fourteen. His book problematizes the role of God in suffering on a personal level, such as illness and the death of loved ones, and on a communal level such as events like the Holocaust. Kushner claimed that humanity is capable of evil actions and we cannot blame God for the free will of humans. He claims that

the theology offered to people in times of need such as “God has a plan,” “Maybe God is testing you,” “You must have done something wrong and now God is punishing you,” places the blame on God for things that God has not done. We must recognize that humans do bad things, selfish things. He argues that the God he believes in does not “allow” bad things to happen to creation. God is bound by the very laws that God set in motion, including the law of free will. Therefore, God is not able to step in and help, even when bad things happen to good people.

While on the surface I can accept Kushner’s argument, as the depth of my own despair grew I found myself questioning even his theological position. Even if we assume God was not responsible selfish human actions how does God stand by and allow it? Either God is cruel, God is NOT all powerful, or God is indifferent.

The more depth of study, reading and analysis I did I unknowingly let go of any attachment to the concept of a God that was invested in the lives of humans. I couldn’t reconcile the image of a caring God with the image of burning children.

As my personal sadness grew, a result of a combination of the teaching I was doing, the interviews, and the readings, going home to my children and showing happiness and hope grew increasingly harder.

The pinnacle moment came sitting in my shower stall sobbing and retching, realizing I needed some kind of transformation. Hoping that a physical transformation would begin the process I went to see my tattoo artist, Dan. Yet afterwards I spent months getting sick every time I looked at the tattoo, every time I touched it. The feeling was not regret, not sadness. Looking back I think I had the delusion that the very act of acknowledging the need to change would create an immediate transformation of self, even

if it was minor. As time went on and that immediate transformation didn't occur I think I became more frustrated in my lack of ability to "fix" myself.

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October 7, 2011

"911, What's your emergency?"

"My mother isn't breathing well and isn't really communicating well," I tell the operator.

"What is your location?"

I give her our address and say, "She has COPD, but her breathing is worse now than usual, and now she can't complete sentences either."

"Okay, are her lips bluish?"

"No," I say.

"Okay, try to keep her comfortable, the ambulance is on the way."

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October 11, 2011

"How is your mom?" My friend asks.

"She's doing okay. The hospital says she has a urinary tract infection and a respiratory infection which is what caused the confusion. But they won't administer the level of pain medication she is on at home because she isn't there for neuropathy or causalgia and they don't agree with her pain management doctor so they just refuse. So she is in a horrendous amount of pain," I say.

"When is she coming home?"

"I'm not really sure yet. She's been in the hospital for a week and a half, but because she wasn't communicating the first three or four days they haven't given us a date yet."

"Are you still going over there every day?"

"Yeah, I can't leave her alone over there. As it is I have to fight with the nurses to give her meds on time. If I leave her alone they might forget she is even there," I say sarcastically.

"You have to be exhausted. Do you have someone that can cover your classes a couple of days?"

"No. I had to cancel one, but I don't want to do that again. But it works ok. I go over there before my morning class and then when I get out I go back over and spend time with her and then go home."

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November 12, 2011

"Mommy this cotton candy is so yummy, do you want some?" My three year old son, Noah, asks holding his bag of cotton candy out to me with sticky blue fingers.

I automatically back up a little and say, "Aww, that's so sweet, but I have my own." He grins and sets the bag down on the table.

"Mom, we want to go through the corn maze again, please!" my five year old son, Kelly, yells running toward me.

"I think the Farm is closing down for the night guys."

"Can we come back tomorrow?" my other three year old son, Keagen, begs sticky blue hands clasped together.

"No, guys this is really far away. I know it's a lot of fun though. Maybe next weekend, when your sister is home and she can come too. Then you guys can take her through the maze, go on the hay ride, and show her the train ride. We have to leave in about ten minutes so you can run around right here in front of the stage but stay close," I say as Keagen works to pull his hands apart.

My three sons' sadness turns to joy as they are set free to run around in front of the bandstand. The field area is fairly large between the tent with the tables to eat and the bandstand flanked on one side by the hay ride and on the other by a row of Harley Davidson motorcycles. My husband and I listen to the music to give the boys a few extra minutes when we see Keagen edging toward the Harleys.

"Keagen, don't go over there," Jon says.

Keagen slows his steps down, looks back at his Dad and begins exaggerating the slow steps forward. Not close to the Harleys yet, Jon sees disaster coming. He slowly gets up and begins moving in Keagen's direction. Slowly, ever so slowly. Hoping Keagen won't bolt forward and knock into one of the expensive motorcycles, launching a domino effect, Jon edges forward.

"Keagen, I am telling you to come here now."

But after a long day, and an overdose of sugar, Keagen gives a mischievous grin and starts his exaggerated walk around the back of the bike. Jon picks up speed as does Keagen and by the time he rounds the corner of the row of bikes he is at a full out run. So is Jon.

Jon skids around the corner of the bikes, scooping Keagen as he runs. But then something happens. He loses his footing somehow. As Jon falls he knows either all 280 lbs.

will land directly on our smallest child or he must tuck his shoulder under and roll to protect the baby, which is what he does.

Initially he pops up, looking shaken but okay.

"Are you okay?" I ask, shaking, when he hands me Keagen and sits down.

Barely shaking his head he whispers, "I hurt myself really bad."

"What do you mean, how bad?"

"I don't know yet, but something popped in my shoulder. It's bad."

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The injury to Jon's shoulder was not a break, but it never fully healed. For the first few weeks he wasn't able to do anything at all. Three months later it was still painful and he couldn't lift anything heavier than a coffee pot with that arm. Things had to change quite a bit at home because he could no longer help around the house.

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December, 2012

"What a dump," my mom says flamboyantly, and then laughs. I stop what I am doing and look over at her.

"Don't you remember that movie? What's her name? Elizabeth Taylor, well originally it was Bette Davis, but Liz Taylor was better, 'What a dump,'" she says over-enunciating the word "dump."

"No, I don't remember that," I say.

"Oh it was so funny. Anyway, 'What a dump,'" she repeats.

"I know I haven't been home to do anything lately. I'm not sure I actually live here anymore. I am only here for six hours to sleep and then I leave again. The last time I saw the kids awake they asked who I was," I say chuckling.

"Why do you have to work so much? I am so worried about you. You are never around. The children miss you. You never spend time with the children," she says.

"Please don't make me feel bad. I don't have a choice about what I am doing."

"Yes you do, quit the second job. Or stop working on the dissertation."

I stare at her for almost a full minute before I answer. "Mo, don't you realize that if I quit now I am giving up everything I have worked ten years for? You and Dad were the ones encouraging me to continue in school. Now you think I should quit, when I am this close to the end?"

"I didn't know it would take this long. Or that the children would have to sacrifice so much for it. They never see you."

"It has taken this long because I am a non-traditional student with four children, trying to work at being a full time faculty member and recently working a second job as well. And you and Dad have been in and out of the hospital over and over in the last year and a half. Mom, most people don't take this long,"

"Well, maybe it just isn't for you then," she says.

Tears stinging my eyes, "Mo, I don't have a choice because the only thing I want to do in my life is teach at a University."

As I walk away she continues mumbling about the children but I refuse to turn around.

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"The suicide motivated by despair fails to interpret the logic of his or her own suicidal impulses correctly and seeks to destroy a healthy bodily life rather than the self which requires destruction in order for self-transformation to occur" (Fasching, 2001, p. 108).

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Personal, Academic, Religious Crisis: My flight from the Holocaust and to the Rwandan genocide…and back (Author's Narratives)

Spring 2011

Academic Ethics Questioned

Even though it seemed like things were going better than ever for me, there are challenges when a cohort of graduate students work together on projects that intellectually overlap. One of those challenges is finding a balance between openness and collegiality while still protecting oneself from accusations of ethical violation. I, unfortunately was naïve and did not protect myself well. When a colleague told me of rumors that I was "known for taking people's ideas" and that people should be "careful talking about their ideas around me," I was in utter shock. Other than in class exercises with editing work, I hadn't seen any of my colleagues' work. In fact I had been naïve enough to allow two colleagues to read my dissertation proposal (even sending a draft to one in an e-mail) and had never seen anyone else's. When I write course papers and use something a colleague said in conversation I cite that person to ensure I give credit for words that are not my own. Under the impression that most of the Department knew of these rumors and had been thoroughly warned to be careful talking to me and around me, I found it difficult to be in the Communication Department without being uncomfortable.

This was likely the largest identity blow I had ever experienced. Everything I do is built around ethics. Of all things to be accused of, unethical action in my academic life was not just utterly shocking but completely crushing. Prior to this event I was experiencing a crisis of faith. As I interviewed and became closer to survivors of the Holocaust I could not reconcile a loving, benevolent God with one that allowed creation to suffer. But I had been questioning on behalf of the other. Now I myself had been delivered a blow I had not previously experienced. Never had anyone questioned my academic integrity. While it was unfounded and ludicrous, the severe strike to my sense of identity and purpose was no less damaging. This began the spiraling descent into despair.

After hearing of the rumors in May of 2011, I immediately began thinking of how to protect myself and my reputation. I met with the Graduate Director and explained what happened and everything I had been told. I told her that my dissertation prospectus had been read by at least two or three other students in the Department, but that I had not seen anyone else's work. I explained that the claims were completely unfounded. Despite all that, I was terrified that because of the status of the student that started the rumors (or the one that shared them with me). I still felt the need to protect myself somehow. I told her I had never dealt with anything like this and I had no idea how to proceed. Most of all, I was concerned that if I continued with my in nearly finished 80 page dissertation proposal that same colleague, or even others based on what I heard about the rumors, may try to claim the ideas were not my own.

Unfortunately, the Graduate Director was unsure how to help me and was not sure how to give me advice. I am uncertain if it is because she was preparing to leave a few months later or if she simply did not know how to help me. I left her office feeling

completely lost and alone. In some ways, worst of all, any comfort, belonging and self-confidence I had gained in the Communication Department was now shattered. I went home believing the best option was to abandon the project I was working on and start over. In my mind I needed to also make sure I did not discuss my work, or any other student's work, until I was out of the program. I had no choice but to start over with something far enough removed from what any of my colleagues were doing that no one could ever question my material.

I had begun researching the genocide that occurred in Rwanda in 1994 for the discussion in my Comparative Religious Ethics course. After the section on the Holocaust and Hiroshima I show the class a documentary titled *Genocide: The Horror Continues*. From the series I show the video detailing the examples from Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Congo. I taught this course a number of times using this documentary and was always amazed at U.S. discretion for involvement in war torn areas.

> In just one hundred days over 800,000 innocent Rwandan men, women and children were brutally murdered while the developed world, impassive and apparently unperturbed, sat back and watched the unfolding apocalypse or simply changed channels. Almost fifty years to the day that my father and father-in-law helped to liberate Europe – when the extermination camps were uncovered and when, in one voice, humanity said, 'Never again' – we once again sat back and permitted this unspeakable horror to occur. (Dallaire, 2005, p. xxiv-xxv)

Sitting in my office, book open on my desk, my mouth hangs open as I read the interviews Jean Hatzfeld did with the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. I am struck by

the horror of the ease with which Fulgence states, "First, I cracked an old mama's skull with a club. But she was already lying almost dead on the ground so I did not feel death at the end of my arm. I went home that evening without even thinking about it" (Hatzfeld, 2003, p. 21). As I read each of the accounts I am sickened, even by those perpetrators who do feel some emotion by one of their first killings as Fulgence goes on to describe:

> At one point I saw a gush of blood begin before my eyes, soaking the skin and clothes of a person about to fall – even in the dim light I saw it streaming down. I sensed it came from my machete. I looked at the blade, and it was wet…I found myself outside, anxious to go home…That person I had just struck – it was a mama, and I felt too sick even in the poor light to finish her off. (Hatzfeld, 2003, p. 21)

Once they had made it through the first or second killing they managed to get over the worst of their emotionality and killed with ease.

On March 25, 1998 President Clinton claimed, "We did not act quickly enough after the killing began. We should not have allowed the refugee camps to become safe haven for the killers. We did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name, genocide" (Emery, 2002). Through much of President Clinton's statement it seemed we did not act in Rwanda primarily because of the semantics of not being able to label it genocide. Gregory Stanton of Genocide Watch claimed there were three reasons the United Nations withdrew peacekeeping forces in Rwanda. The first reason was that the Rwandan government had to agree to the presence of the U.N. and because the Rwandan government was spearheading the genocide they would certainly not approve. Second, the U.N. forces didn't believe a few people would be able to stop the genocide. Although General Dallaire argued this point claiming a clear and direct retaliation would have the potential to stop the genocide. The

third reason Stanton said was, "The UN security council members just didn't think that Rwanda was important enough. It's a country of people who are of a certain color. I think if 800,000 people were dying in Central Europe there would have been a very different response" (Emery, 2002). Leading up to and during the Holocaust the majority of the global community didn't act in large part because the victims were Jewish. A long history of Anti-Semitism allowed the Jews to be rounded up and murdered. In similar fashion, according to Stanton, we did not act in Rwanda because of the race of people being murdered.

Beginning with one book, a book on sale at the book store, I delved into another world of genocide. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda* told the story of the Rwandan genocide, one that in many ways is dramatically different from the Holocaust.

> The ones who are left,' the nurse said, 'are all machete cases.' I saw that – multiple amputations, split faces swollen around stiches. 'We had some with the brain coming out,'…'Strange, no? The RPA don't use machetes. They did this to their own…'This hospital - last year big massacre. Hutus killing Tutsis, doctors killing doctors, doctors killing patients, patients killing doctors, nurses, everybody'. (Gourevitch , 194-195)

The stories from the Holocaust are as horrific in nature, but there was a shift in the approach to the murder of the Jews after Kristallnacht. The Nazis became more clinical in their approach. Richard Rubenstein argues that the turning point in the systematic killing of the Jews was Kristallnacht. "Himmler reasoned that the only way to efficiently organize mass death was to remove the element of personal emotion and replace it with the cool and efficient operations of the impersonal techno-bureaucratic procedures that typified the

death camps. *Hatred is messy and inefficient*" (emphasis not in original) (Fasching & deChant, 2001, p. 52). Techno-bureaucracy became the means to reach the intended outcome, the efficient completion of the goal, the eradication of the Jews. The way the people were murdered, the number of deaths, were no less staggering. In fact the ability for humans to separate emotion from the murderous killing of other humans is horrifying in nature.

But, what I see in the Rwandan accounts that invade my thoughts is precisely the personal nature of the murderers. Neighbors killing neighbors, that they have known most of their lives, with machetes.

> We became more and more cruel, more and more calm, more and more bloody. But we did not see that we were becoming more and more killers. The more we cut, the more cutting became child's play to us. For a few, it turned into a treat, if I may say so. (Hatzfeld, 2003, p.50)

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In December 2009, four months into the Holocaust project with Dr. Carolyn Ellis, Dr. Mark Greenberg requested I meet with him. During that meeting Dr. Greenberg asked if I was interested in getting involved with other survivors of genocide. My involvement with the Holocaust project had really just begun, so I told him I wanted to focus there for now but that I would keep in mind the possibility of extending my work to other genocides.

Teaching the "Comparative Religious Ethics" course, becoming engaged with insightful students, as well as continuing to interview Holocaust survivors, increasingly made me more interested in global responsibility of genocide prevention. In October 2010 I spoke with Dr. Greenberg and told him that I had changed my mind and was very

interested in getting involved in what the library was doing with Rwandan survivors. In Spring 2011 I saw an email advertising a talk by Carl Wilkens on campus about his experience as the only American that stayed in Rwanda during the genocide and I knew I had to attend. Something just pulled at me. Prior to the talk I spoke with Dr. Greenberg again and reminded him of my desire to work with the library on any upcoming projects with Rwandan survivors. Dr. Greenberg said he needed to introduce me to Dr. Musa Olaka, the man leading and organizing the Rwanda project.

Carl Wilkens' talk re-ignited me. He explained how humanity and relationality were the primary reasons some Hutus were willing to overlook Tutsi homes. He told a story of a neighbor, an older Hutu woman, who protected Mr. Wilkens and the woman that worked for him (who was a Tutsi). In most all other cases the Interahamwe would have killed Wilkens for hiding the Tutsi woman and the woman herself, but for some reason they left his house alone. Wilkens claimed the Hutu woman looked at the soldier and said, "His children play with our children." Something about the woman's approach made the Interahamwe leave Wilkens and the Tutsi woman working for him alone. Wilkens believed it was the older woman's ability to make the Interahamwe soldier recognize their humanity and employed the importance of relationships to protect them. His talk strengthened the connections I was making between relationality, Holocaust survivors, and the survivors of other genocides. If relationality can make a killer recognize the humanity in their enemy, relationality can increase a listener's ability to internalize a genocide survivor's story, become a secondary witness, and carry it forward.

After listening to Wilkens, Dr. Greenberg introduced me to Dr. Olaka. I spent about an hour talking with him about my research interests and their connection to the Rwanda

project. I described my perspective on relationality, how we engage survivors specifically and that we need to create an ethic of care beginning with the pre-interview process. Dr. Olaka showed interest and shared with me the possibility of the library sending a group to Africa in the Fall 2011 semester to interview Rwandan survivors. I told him I was extremely interested and to please keep me informed.

I saw Carl Wilkens was speaking again and I attended his talk a second time. Waiting to meet him after the talk I struck up conversation with his wife about having their children in Rwanda during the genocide and how frightening that must have been. As our conversation continued she invited me to talk with both of them further about actually travelling to Africa with them. I got a copy of his book, read it that weekend and knew I had found my new passion.

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Jean Hatzfeld interviewed fourteen survivors of the Rwandan genocide in his book Life Laid Bare and then went on to interview nine Hutu killers and reported on the interviews in his book Machete Season. Under the trees at a table behind Cooper Hall I am absorbed in both books side by side. Rubbing my arms I try to smooth the goosebumps that have broken out on my arms as I read. "…I discovered the bloody remains of Roseline and Catherine, my two little sisters…I gave in to overwhelming grief…I caught myself asking to die. And yet, I never stood up from my hiding place when I sensed that hunters were nearby…" (Hatzfeld, 2000, p. 186).

Looking up from the book I stare across the courtyard at nothing in particular as I remember words I read a little earlier.

> The dead looked like pictures of the dead. They did not smell. They did not buzz with flies. They had been killed thirteen months earlier, and they hadn't been moved. Skin stuck here and there over the bones, many of which lay scattered away from the bodies, dismembered by the killers… (Gourevitch, 1998, p. 15).

My stomach tightens as I think of the bodies lying on top of one another. Thinking of the seeming madness that struck the killers, allowing them to take to "cutting" everyone they saw as the enemy. I hear Claudine's interview, "To hear the Whites tell it, the genocide is supposedly a fit of madness, but that's not true. It's a project that is meticulously planned and properly carried out" (Hatzfeld, 2000, p. 201).

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Work Ethic Questioned

I decided a project on Rwanda was just what I needed to re-define my focus as separate from anyone else in the Communication Department without completely abandoning the theory work I had done and wanted to use. Unfortunately, because I had been saddened and disillusioned by starting the process again, I made a grave error. I did not discuss the change with my advisor. I did the work, creating yet another 78 page dissertation prospectus with a literature review and proposed action.

My intent for that project was to discuss with my prior interviewees what had been done correctly and poorly in their past interviews to learn how to better interview genocide survivors. Part of what drove my excitement as I worked on this prospectus was the possibility of actually using what I had learned to help survivors in Africa. I thought if I could get my project underway fast enough I may be able to figure out how to join the trip

to Africa in the Fall and maybe use the data I collected from my Holocaust interviewees in the interviews with Rwandan survivors.

After submitting the prospectus to my advisor in May 2011 her comments sounded almost pained that I had abandoned my former project and confused that I had done so without consulting her. She said it seemed like I was trying to take the easy way out with the project by using material I had and simply overlaying new material. I was crushed. My excitement extinguished. Rather than try to explain, I sent her a message apologizing and telling her it was not meant to be the easy way out.

So in addition to having my academic ethics questioned, I felt like now my work ethic was also being questioned, something else I had never experienced. These are aspects of my life I pride myself on, my ethics and how hard I work. My first semester in Graduate School I took 16 credit hours receiving two "A+'s" and three "A's," while working as a GTA for Dr. Fasching, working part-time in the Religious Studies Department, and raising a toddler. While in the third semester of my Master's degree in Religious Studies, in Fall 2003, I requested and was granted approval to simultaneously pursue the Master's degree and begin the Doctoral Program in Criminology while still working as a GTA for Dr. Fasching and still working part-time in the Religious Studies Department and raising my daughter. Unfortunately, my advisor could not see all the work I had done on both proposals (or why) so it was perceived as something it was not. So even though it was an attempt to protect myself, all I accomplished with my topic change was further damage to my credibility. In the course of three short months I had my academic and my work ethic doubted. To me, these traits define my identity. In addition to my deteriorated faith by Summer 2011 the spiral into despair was rapidly intensifying.

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At this point I felt even more lost. I had had a fiery passion for my original Holocaust prospectus. Because of the shock and fear evoked in me by my colleague and friend, and lack of guidance from my Graduate Director, I had abandoned the project. Searching for something that I could still be passionate about I turned to the Rwanda project. When that was denied I lost the fire almost completely and began looking simply for a project I could tolerate and that my committee would approve so I could just be done. I still felt the need to separate from anything my colleagues were doing, so once again I turned to Dr. Fasching and asked for help. As he and I spoke we discussed the various possibilities using the background I had gained from Religious Studies and Communication. I drew up another proposal, much more basic than the prior ones, claiming I would interview survivors about their religious beliefs pre-war, during the war, and post war. This prospectus was approved by my committee on October 28, 2011. After submitting roughly 200 pages over a year and a half I finally had a way to move forward.

Despite my initial relief, I still faced some challenges. Because of the rumors I had become embarrassed to even enter the Communication Department. I stopped trying to go to conferences. I stopped attending any events in Communication such as Communication Day, orientation, etc. that I had been attending every year since I entered the program. I didn't know who all had heard the rumors and because there wasn't anyone to "confront" or confide in, I just stopped going into the Department. To the Department I am sure it looked like I simply disappeared. Instead I focused my efforts in other places.

Fall 2011 I received a Visiting Instructor line in Religious Studies so I worked to be a strong faculty member hoping I would be able to make the line permanent once the year

was through. I worked the Incoming Student Stampedes, was on the Undergraduate Committee, the Women's Status Committee, and spoke at events such as the Student Success Conference and at the Interfaith Dialogue. Spring 2012 looked very much the same. I served on the Women's Status Committee, the Undergraduate Committee, worked the Incoming Student Stampede for Success, attended the Citizenship Initiative Workshop, chaired a panel on Reparation and Redress, and attended another Interfaith Dialogue. Also during that semester I began interviewing. I completed nine pre-interviews, interviews, or meetings with Holocaust survivors that semester and attended two Holocaust Survivor Support Group Meetings. All of this was on top of the fact that as an Instructor I had four separate preps and two of my courses were Gordon Rule courses. Clearly I was trying to prove my work ethic whether I realized it at the time or not.

Visual Representations of Horror

September 2011 (In Class)

"Throughout the semester we have been looking at examples of Religious Quest and how we see it manifest using Contemporary film. Looking at different themes we have used *Groundhog Day* to see the Quest for Nirvana or liberation. We have looked at *Heaven and Earth* to see how two people are affected by cross-cultural relationships and war and the effect on their religious and spiritual journeys. In two weeks we will begin looking at the intersection of religion, meaning, and making a way in life. Delving into what people do in the name of religion we will see examples in people like Gandhi and Malcolm X. At the beginning of the semester I mentioned to you that there would be a film coming to theaters this semester that you would need to see, *Machine Gun Preacher*. I discussed that the ticket price needed to be considered part of the course. There happens to be a pre-screening this

week and I have eight extra tickets to the pre-screening. It is a weeknight, and you have to come at least an hour and a half early because pre-screenings always pass out too many tickets. Please only take them if you know you will use them. Otherwise please see it when it comes out in two weeks." I hold the tickets up.

Initially a lot of people throw their hands in the air, but then I see hands start to go down as they quietly check their calendar or phone. I hear a few people murmuring about riding together and then come up to get tickets.

"Ok, so last minute reminder about this film. It is brand new. I haven't seen it yet. The eight of you will see it with me for the first time. This is important because it is my policy to let my students know if the story is violent, graphic, if there are sex scenes, whatever the case is. I am letting you know ahead of time I have no idea about this film," I glance around and several students are nodding.

"But I have read about Sam Childers and his story is very much in line with our theme of someone being driven by religion to go on a quest for the other. So we will start with *Gandhi* and by the time we have finished our discussion of that everyone will have seen *Machine Gun Preacher* and we will go on to discuss that. Have a great afternoon and I will see you next time."

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Machine Gun Preacher

My friend and I attend the screening together. We get there really early to get in line and make sure we can get in. We decide to wait until we are seated to get snacks so we don't eat them all standing in line. Finally they begin letting the crowd in the theater and we pick seats. I see four of the eight students I passed out tickets to. My friend offers to get

the snacks so I won't risk missing the beginning of the film. By the time she gets back the movie has started. She slips into the seat next to me and we stare silently at the screen in shock. We are completely unprepared for what we see.

The scene opens in Southern Sudan in 2003. Just leading into the scene soldiers come into a village and begin mercilessly killing everyone they find with guns, machetes, knives, and begin setting houses on fire. After killing a woman's husband they drag the woman and her child away from the man's body and hand the young boy a club. The soldier begins yelling at the boy, slicing the boy's cheek open with a knife when he doesn't respond. The mother is yelling and sobbing, her hand moving to cover her mouth. The young boy picks up the club and slowly stands. The soldier grabs the boy's arms shaking them and shouting. The young boy raises the club above his head, his mother nods at him to go ahead. He brings the club down on her head. The camera shot cuts away.

The popcorn no longer appealing, my friend and I sit through the entire film linked arm in arm in complete silence, neither of us moving other than me wiping away the tears streaming down my face. I use all the napkins, both of my sleeves, and the long sleeve shirt I brought as a back-up in case I was cold. Forty-five minutes into the movie the main character, Sam, comes across a village that has been bombed. Children are huddled around burnt corpses. Sam walks around surveying the damage. A dog runs away in the background and a small boy, maybe four or five, is chasing after the dog crying. Sam barely registers the small boy as he scans the surroundings of another child rocking a dead body when a bomb goes off in the distance. Sam runs in that direction and finds the small boy, legs torn off, body bloody. Sam holds the child sobbing.

Describing virtually every scene couldn't convey the horror and tragedy this film brought to light. For me, it gave visual representations to the images that haunt me from the memoirs and interviews I have read on the genocide in Rwanda. But, having read those memoirs or interviews, and exposing myself to the mental images did nothing to prepare me to encounter the graphic visual representations. Both my friend and I leave the theater sick unable to talk or eat as we had planned. Attending class the following week I cancel the assignment and apologize to the students who had attended the screening.

While part of me believes that people, especially in the U.S. need to have a glimpse of the honest, brutal existence of civil war and genocide in Africa I can't support showing my students the film at the time. (Side Note: I do show the movie to my film class now). I end up making a good decision because the film is not released to theaters across the U.S. and my students can't see it anyway.

While there are plenty of reviews about the actors and Sam Childers, the man called the "gun wielding pastor," I argue one unstated reason the film isn't popular is because it is raw. It forces the viewer into the lives of children in Sudan watching their parents being killed, running from the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army headed by Joseph Kony). It is difficult to go back to one's normal life and existence after seeing those images. Those images haunt you.

October 27, 2011

"Hey Dad, how's it going?"

"Okay, I just left my doctor's office and they are sending me to the hospital for some tests."

"What do you mean? What for?"

"The pain in my leg has gotten so bad that I am having trouble walking. The doctor looked at it and wants to run some tests to see if it is connected to a blocked artery."

"Ok, I'm on my way down there."

"You don't need to do that, you need to be worried about getting ready for your proposal defense tomorrow," he says.

"Dad, I am on my way to the hospital," I begin to argue.

"They have to run the tests to determine what to do. If they find anything then come down, ok?"

October 28, 2011

"How did the defense go?" my Dad asks.

"We just finished meeting so I'm still a little overwhelmed. I mean I passed, but there is a lot of work ahead of me to finish the dissertation. This was just the first step in the process," I say.

"But it's wonderful to make it through the first step."

"What did the doctor say?"

"The pain I have been having is connected to a blocked artery. She thinks they are going to need to do surgery and go in through the groin and down to open the blocked artery. She is concerned that if they don't do it now that something may break off and go to my heart."

"Does that mean the surgery is today?"

"Yeah, she said she thinks within the next few hours."

"Wow. Okay I am on my way down there."

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October 29, 2011

"Dad," I say gently rubbing his arm, "How're you feeling?"

"Ok," he says and winces as he tries to lift himself up some.

"How is your leg?"

"It's pretty bad," he says lifting the sheet and pushing the gown up on his thigh.

"Wait, why is there a bandage all the way down your leg? I thought it was a small incision in through the groin and down into the vein," I say.

"She ran into some trouble and had to harvest from a different vein so the incision is 30 inches long, from my groin to my calf."

"Oh my god, did the doctor tell you how long the recovery process will be?"

"She said at least 6 weeks before I am really well, but I have to be back at work in two weeks," he says.

"Dad come stay with us at least a week. Let us take care of you and help you until you are up and around at least."

"No way," he says laughing, "I love my grandchildren but I am too old for all that noise, and I want to smoke in the house and do what I want to do. You can help me get settled in once I get home and check in on me though."

"Ok Dad, I understand. I will help you get settled in, do some shopping for you. But then I'm going to bring you dinner at night for at least a week. I can't have you trying to stand in the kitchen," I tell him.

"No, that's a thirty minute drive for you each way. No."

"So are you just going to eat cashews for a week or two?" I say grinning. "Stop worrying we will help take care of you." I kiss him on top of the head.

Personal and Religious Crisis: The Holocaust, Liberation, and Rebuilding a Life (Victims' Narratives)

During the War
Kitty Sharf Zuchovicki

"Can you tell me a little about the rise of Anti-Semitism and how you felt at the beginning of the war?"

"Well at the beginning it was small things, but when you are young they don't feel small. My friends stopped talking to me. They began ignoring me. I used to meet my friends at this lovely park by our home. One day they wanted nothing to do with me. That was very hard."

"I am sure it was, especially as a child not really understanding why it is happening," I say.

"Yes. And when I told my parents they told me to go back the next day with a book and ignore the children. But that was very hard to do. That's when I started wondering what it meant to be a Jew and started wondering why I was a Jew."

"What else happened? Tell me about the Hitler Jugend and the Orthodox Jews," I say.

"Oh, well I was at the park and the Gestapo were there watching the Hitler Jugend beating up on Orthodox Jews, both children and elderly. I was frightened, so I ran home. My parents told me not to go back to the park. Then shortly after that I was thrown out of school, which is the story I told you about the Gestapo shouting at a couple of us to "Raus! Raus Jude!" meaning, Out! Out Jew! I was so frightened that I tried to run, not even taking my books. The Gestapo threw my book at me and the corner of the book hit my forehead making me bleed. I remember the teacher and other children just laughing at me. That was

such a terrible feeling." She stops for a minute, silent, thinking. "I thought to myself I am not a bad person, I am nice to others, it is just that I am a Jew. That made the feeling worse," she said shivering.

"Which feeling?"

"That being Jewish meant something was wrong with me, that I was dirty, and had no dignity, and that if someone did talk to me I should be grateful."

I sit quietly, tears in my eyes, watching Kitty. She has a tissue touching it to the corner of each eye.

"After this my father decided it had become too dangerous and that we must go. The closest country was Switzerland, so we went there. My parents were treated poorly, but I was treated very nicely there. But my parents could not get a permit to work there so my father decided we had to go to France."

"France is where the summer camp was, right? With Madame Wallerstein?"

"Yes, a vacation camp, but Madame Wallerstein was worried about the refugee children, so she had many of us there also. It was a very sad time for me. My parents didn't come back, and the children that were vacationing there would get presents and sweets when their families would come to visit. It was hard on us to see them with their families when ours were not there and then the children enjoyed torturing the refugee children by eating the sweets in front of us and not giving us any."

"Where were your parents?"

"I found out later my father was in a work camp. He made friends in the camp that found out that he would be taken to an extermination camp. So the friends of his worked a plan to poison him, but just a little, so that he would tell of the problem with his heart and

be discharged. It worked, but it was so hard on him, the terror and recovery, that he became a very bitter man. Once he was feeling some better, he and my mother came to get me to join them in Bordeaux. But Madame Wallerstein did not want me to go. She told my parents to leave me there until the war was over, but they fought with her and I left with them."

"Then I was kicked out of school again by the French Nazi authority. But this was different because the teacher was crying, the children were scared. I felt comforted because they were not all laughing at me. The next morning my father decided it was getting too dangerous again and we needed to leave. This is when we traveled to Bayonne to catch a boat away from France. But when we got to the outskirts of Bayonne it was so crowded that the taxi had to leave us at the outskirts of the city. A peasant woman saw us and took us to stay the night with her family, because there was nowhere to stay."

"That was nice," I say.

"Yes, she put me in bed with her granddaughter and I felt so warm. The next morning we were waiting to board the boat with hundreds of other people. The boat was a banana boat. So the captain, to make room for as many people as possible, began by throwing off the green bananas, which was very risky for him because they were not his bananas. He managed to get all the people waiting on board."

"Wow, that's amazing. He risked his life to transport these people," I say.

"Yes, he did. And we later realized we didn't even know his name, only the name of the boat, Kilisie. So we traveled for a number of days on the boat and got to Lisbon. But when we got there people surrounded the boat and told us they would not take us prisoner

but we would not be allowed to come onto shore. So the Captain decided to move us onto another boat."

"Why? Why didn't he just keep you on his boat?"

"Because it was so overloaded that we would sink if he took it into the open sea. He had no choice but to move us. But at first the other Captain refused to take us, but his crew told him if he did not take us he would have an accident in the middle of the sea. So he knew he had no choice. So we all moved to the other boat. This boat took us to Morocco."

"Did your family know anything of Morocco?"

"No, in fact, I said they are cannibals, they are going to eat us! But there was a lot of bad behavior. But we got lucky. We stayed with the Laredo family, who were very well off. They had four children. One of the girls was almost my age. But she was not interested in being my friend. I wanted her acceptance so badly because my friends had turned away from me at home. But she was not interested to be with me. Anytime she was somewhere and I showed up she left. That left me with a bad feeling. I couldn't understand what I did to her to make her not like me. It took me years to get over that."

"I can imagine. It is really hard for children when they feel like outsiders."

"Yes it is, especially when they don't know why. That is one of the messages I try to teach today, that you have to be happy with yourself. Hug yourself."

I smile at her. "Can you tell me what happened when you moved away from the Laredo family?"

"My father got a job contract in Buenos Aires. I was not quite twelve when we arrived. My mother didn't realize at the time that I was sick with tuberculosis. The worst kind, my lungs were full with germs, I was bleeding. My mother just thought I was lazy

because with tuberculosis your lung has no nerves so you are just tired and coughing. It wasn't until I started to bleed out of my mouth that my parents realized I had tuberculosis. There was no medicine at the time to help, so I was confined to rest. That lasted six years."

"Six years! Wow, from when you were twelve until you were eighteen?"

"Yes, and because I was so sick the doctors told my mother not to bother educating me because I was going to die anyway. But I wanted to finish my high school, so I continued to try to study on my own. But I had no discipline to study because I was not in school for so long. And I had to change languages a number of times as we moved. I did eventually finish my high school, but it took me a lot longer. I was going to try to become a dentist, but I failed in the second year because I did not understand how to study and what I needed to get from the books. So, I felt miserable in that. It made me feel just that all the others are able to do everything and I am not, I am a loser, and that's a very, very bad thing to feel" (Lockler, 12, 2009).

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During the War
R. Hammond

"Can you tell me about your experiences during the war?"

"In 1944 the Germans came and we were taken from our home. We believed we were going to work on a farm. We gathered everything we could carry and got ready,"

"And when was that?"

"March or April, 1944. The police came and we were taken to a lumber yard with wire around it and held there for around 6 or 8 weeks. We only had the goods we brought

with us. There were people cooking bacon and sausage and we went to my father and asked if we could have it and he said yes," she tells me.

"Eventually we were gathered onto railroad station cars jammed full of people and spent three days and three nights on the train to get to Auschwitz. When we got there they separated the men from the women and then the young women from the older women. Any women with children were sent with the older women. Even though my mother was only 46 she was sent to the side with the older women," she pauses here sighing heavily.

"How long were you in Auschwitz?" I ask.

"Only a few weeks, then we were taken to work at the Krupp Factory. In Auschwitz I could see the crematorium with the flames. There was always a strange odor. Now we know it was flesh." She pauses and then says, "We were naïve. We didn't know about the world happenings."

"Was your sister with you?"

"Yes, she was with me the whole time," she replies.

"Can you tell me about your escape?"

"There were bombs falling, and whenever the bombs were falling all the guards went to the shelter. A man working in the factory told one of the girls with us that once this was over he would help us. When the bombing started and the guards went to the shelter, six of us walked out. There were usually guards at the gates, but they were in the shelter too," she says.

"You just walked out? Where did you go?"

"We came to a Jewish cemetery and hid in the cellar there and the girl who talked to the factory worker that agreed to help us snuck out and went to find him. He was shocked to see her, but he kept his word. We never went back to the camp."

"Your sister was still with you?"

"Yes, my sister, and four other girls. Four of us went to stay with the factory worker and the other two girls stayed with someone else."

"Where did you go from there?"

"For a little while I worked for the British military government and they gave us a place to live and rations. Then we moved to Frankfurt to the American zone and I went to the American Joint Distribution Company to find a job. When I got there they told me there were no jobs. But I slipped into the Director's office and told him our story and he gave all four of us jobs," she says.

"Can you tell me about your religious practices during the war?"

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"Do you remember any rituals that you did?"

"No, we weren't too interested in keeping up with the rituals. All that was so far away. Our parents did all of that, so once we were away from them we didn't follow the rituals. We were just worried about surviving, about getting out of Germany," she says. (R. Hammond, personal communication, February 24, 2012).

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Post-War Religious Experiences
R. Hammond

"When did you come to the United States?" I ask Ms. Hammond.

"In 1948. I met my husband in Germany got married and had a baby and then in 1948 immigrated to the United States. My sister and brother came later," she says.

"Was it a religious ceremony?"

"No, it was a civil service. My husband was not Jewish. I think it is prejudice to not marry someone you love because they are not the same religion as you," she says.

"There was one girl that escaped with us that is very religious. She keeps a kosher home, her two sons are very religious, and they observe the holidays. She went right back to where she was before," she says.

"Did you raise your children religious?"

"Do I have the right to make my children Jewish? If it happens again they will be persecuted" she says shaking her head. "They were exposed to both and picked up what they wanted. One daughter married a Catholic, two daughters follow Judaism, our son is Jewish but not practicing, and one daughter is Messianic Jew. They each picked what they wanted."

"What do you believe about God now?"

"When I first was out of the camps I wasn't sure there really was a God. Eventually I got back to believing. I know there is a God. How can the world develop without God? But if God was active, would there be suffering? I can't imagine God is active with millions and millions of people that died. If God was active children wouldn't die of cancer," she says and then stops to wipe her eyes.

"Do you believe God helped you survive?"

"I don't think so. If I believe God helped me survive then I have to blame God for the people he didn't. We have free will, it isn't God's fault. God didn't pick me out of all those people to be saved."

(R. Hammond, personal communication, February 24, 2012).

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Internalization of Suffering (Convergence of Narratives)

I stand silent, awed by the beauty surrounding him.

He stands, making no move

he nor I.

Descriptions of pearly gates and streets of gold fall short

Compared to the blissful serenity

I feel standing near

His outstretched, patiently waiting hand.

Statuesque a single tear escapes down my cheek

“Tell me why God created and then allowed creation to suffer,” I say

Reaching out my hand

“Why were babies allowed to be burned alive in the fires of Auschwitz?”

Our fingertips almost touching

He lowers his head

“I will have eternal separation over presence with God that allows chasms of human suffering.”

Our fingertips brush lightly

my hand drops slowly back to my side

Turning my face from his.

Glistening like dew are the tears on his cheeks.

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December, 2011

My mind flutters to the book in my office. Alone, I stand in the kitchen making dinner. I'll just go get it and read through the pages again. I can't do that, I have to wait. If anyone sees me they will start asking questions. I hold the black plastic spoon, mindlessly stirring the boiling water with the noodles for macaroni and cheese. I watch the slow boil, the water moving in and out of itself. Why do you want to read the book again? I ask myself.

"Mom, how long until dinner?" my daughter asks impatiently.

"Almost done," I say absently without taking my eyes off the rolling water.

After setting dinner in front of my children I walk back to my home office. I try to seem nonchalant so the children won't wonder what I am doing; I feel sure my stride gives away a sense of purpose. In my office I walk straight to the shelf I set the book on the last time I came to read the directions, just a few days ago. I rub my fingers down the raised cover and open directly to the page I have lightly tagged. I quickly scan once the list of medications. I sit down on the floor of my office, my back to the bookcase, then go back to the top of the list and move through them methodically. So many of them I have never heard of. But one or two ring a bell. I remind myself to look a few up on-line to determine whether it is anything I have in the house as I turn the page to read the directions again. Take a certain number of the pills, depending on which medication, with a glass of wine, then take more of the pills, then place bag on head. Why should I place a bag on my head? I wonder. If I am taking the pills shouldn't that do the job? I skip the rest of the directions that I have read over and over and turn the page. This is where I always get stuck. Talk with your family before you make any decisions. Make sure all your affairs are in order and that

you have discussed the decision in full with all of your loved ones. I slowly close the book, in the same place as last time, and the time before that.

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Spring 2010

"Fairly early in nursing for me a young woman, probably in her 20's, was brought in. She had tried to commit suicide, overdosed. We were so close in age, it scared me. I didn't know what to say to her. I just gently stroked her forehead and said, 'Oh honey, why would you do this?' She took a lot, enough that it was surprising she survived at all. We pumped her stomach. I looked at her face, her eyes closed, charcoal coming out of her mouth, vomit down her chin, and mascara under her eyes. I brushed the hair off her forehead. 'Sweet girl, you didn't want to die,'" my friend pauses, "but I lied to her. She did want to die. I know that now. I know now that I was wrong. She did want to, and I lied to her by trying to convince her in that moment that she didn't want to die."

Tears slip down my face, I try to wipe away them away but they just keep coming. I swallow, but my throat hurts. My friend waits, saying nothing for a moment. She is letting the magnitude of what she has said sink in. I sit quietly, not knowing how to respond.

"Now I see she did want death; she just didn't realize that what had to die was not her body but her 'self' so she attacked her body," she says.

I nod. I know exactly what my friend is saying, I have given this lecture to anywhere from 75 to 200 students every semester for a few years now.

"Oh, God," I say, "I am Alvarez."

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"It is as if the suicide were a prophet, returned from the abyss of nothingness, for the purpose of announcing one final public message – life has no meaning, it is not worth living" (Fasching, 2001, p. 90).

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December, 2011

Holding the pill bottle up the sun shines through, tinting the four white pills inside orange. I lean my head back on the headrest. Words I have spoken to my class over and over in the lecture on Suicide and the Art of Dying from A. Alvarez's The Savage God: "No one is promiscuous in his way of dying," he tells us. "A man who has decided to hang himself will never jump in front of a train...." reverberates through my head until I pick up my head and shake it trying to make it stop (Alvarez, 1970, p. 267-268). Yet I understand. Rarely does someone who has given their own method of death a great amount of thought suddenly change that method. It becomes calculated, all-consuming until every fine detail is clear. Where, when, how. So often it is misconstrued as cowardice by outsiders because mastery over one's own death calls the very sacredness of life into question. Yet when life no longer feels sacred don't those same questions arise? I close my eyes, lean my head back against the headrest, enclosing the pill bottle with the four pills inside in the palm of my hand.

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January, 2012

Long sleeves cover my scarred left arm. I don't let anyone see my indelible mark. I don't regret it; I am not embarrassed by it. But I don't want to explain it. I don't want anyone to ask. Sitting alone I trace the letters. Still slightly raised they feel like razor slashes

as well as looking like them. Watching my fingertip sliding over the welts the nausea becomes overwhelming and I run to the bathroom. It is a reminder of all the changes I want to see in the world, but it is also a clear reminder of all my failures. A reminder of every time I have fallen short. It is overwhelming, painful, and yet it was meant to be exactly that, a constant reminder. I just never expected the physical illness that has accompanied the emotional pain.

Sweating, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, I overcome the urge to throw up. Pulling the sleeve back down over my scarred left arm, I wipe my face.

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January 26, 2012

"Hi Kitty," I say.

"Tori," she says with that sound of relief, like I am just the person she has been waiting to hear from. "How is my petunia?" She asks about my daughter.

"She is doing really well, growing up so fast. How are you?"

"Oh, I am not doing so well."

Kitty went on to tell me that she had become very ill. She and her husband Saverio had gone to be with their daughter who could help take care of them until they could find out what was wrong. Our conversation was cut short as a doctor came in to see her. I intended to tell her that I was beginning to interview for my dissertation but didn't get the chance. Kitty passed away a month and a half later on March 11, 2012.

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> Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer – a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen. (Anzaldúa, 1987, pg 72)

Turning to Spiral Bound
December, 2012

Picking up the spiral bound notebook I walk outside. A table behind my building opens; I walk over and sit down. Opening the cover I run my fingers lightly over the lines on the page before I begin writing anything. Wind ruffles through my hair, goosebumps breaking out on my skin. My pen is poised above the paper for long minutes before the ink bleeds into the paper. *What do I write? Where do I start?* I wonder to myself. Lightly touching the pen to the paper I begin with my tattoo that I trace with my finger, as I have the lines on the paper. I write slowly about the emotions it evokes. Trying to sort out why I got it in the first place I begin writing stories. My hand picks up speed, eventually the words on the page are blurred and many unfinished as I try to vomit on the page all the thoughts rushing through my head. *Did I say that already?* I think after certain parts. *Does it matter?* And I continue on. Stream of consciousness, chaos, narrative, dialogue, scenes, thoughts, actions, all unfiltered, uncensored, unedited, until finally I stop a moment and realize the light around me has faded. I pick up my spiral notebook and hold it to my chest.

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Breaking Point
May, 2013

"Hey," my best friend, Charlie, says coming in the door. She and I have planned to spend the evening watching movies.

"Hi," I call from the kitchen. "Jon just took the kids to bed so we have the living room."

"Did you pick what you wanted to watch? I have a couple of ideas, but…" She stops short.

I look up from the sink. "What?" I ask.

"Are you okay? You don't look right."

"I'm ok. A little tired, it's been a long day today. And I don't feel so well. I have had a pretty bad headache, and some stomach cramps, but nothing too severe," I say.

"You are really pale. How long have you had the stomach cramps?"

"I don't know, since yesterday I guess."

"Maybe you ate something that made you sick. What did you eat last?"

I pause looking down a minute, thinking, "Um, I can't remember."

"It couldn't have been that long ago. What did you have for lunch?"

"I haven't felt much like eating, and I've been really busy."

"Ok, what did you have for dinner last night?"

"I got home really late last night so I went right to bed," I say.

"So, maybe what you ate yesterday for lunch?"

I shook my head. "Ok, seriously when did you eat last?" Charlie asks.

"Okay, well today is Wednesday, right?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know, I think Sunday night," I say quietly.

"What?"

I bend my head shamefully. "Sunday night," I repeat.

"No wonder you have stomach cramps! You are making yourself sick," she says.

"It isn't on purpose," I say, "I just keep forgetting. And I know that sounds ridiculous. But I swear. Look, I mean to eat lunch between classes and I get busy with students or grading and decide I will eat between my next classes but then the same happens. Then I decide to forget it that it's too late anyway and that I will eat dinner when I get home. Then I get home and before I even change Mo catches me and the conversation about finances, or someone being mean to her, or the kids being yelled at, or me not spending enough time with her, or how I am neglecting her, lasts at least an hour. At the end of it my stomach is upset and I can't think of eating so I decide I will eat when I get up. But I hate breakfast and have never eaten in the morning, so I decide I will eat lunch between classes. You see, it really isn't on purpose."

My best friend looks at me and puts her hand on my shoulder and says, "This has to stop. There are four beautiful babies that need you, and you can't care for them if you aren't caring for yourself."

"I know that, but that assumes that I am trying to hurt myself. I am not."

"No, it assumes that you are neglecting yourself. You can't care for others if you aren't caring for yourself. Eventually your body is going to refuse to keep going. You have to take care of you. Do I even want to know how often this happens? The not eating for potentially a day or more at a time?"

I shake my head, "No, you don't. But look, I'm certainly not losing weight," I say with a grin, "so it isn't like I'm wasting away."

She grins at me and says, "I know we all share in a little too much cake, but this is not an effective weight loss program."

"I haven't gone this long before; it was an accident. But I know you are right and I will be more careful and try to take better care of myself. Now can we please watch a movie before one of the kids gets up and needs something?" I say smiling.

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"Nepantleras use their views from these cracks-between-worlds to invent holistic, relational theories and tactics enabling them to reconceive or in other ways transform the various worlds in which they exist" (Keating, 2006, pg 9).

Broken identity
May, 2013

"For the first time I wish I hadn't gone into religious studies."

"Why?" Charlie asks me.

"Because in moments like this I want to be able to fall to my knees, pray and believe that something out there can help me rather than having studied enough about religion to doubt any benevolent force in the universe will rain sympathy on me. But if Holocaust survivors didn't get help during their torture, exile, tragedy, then I am certainly in no position to even ask for any help," I say.

"Try to help me understand," she says.

I take a deep breath, sit back, close my eyes. Images swim through my mind, my children, mom, husband, all racing while screaming my name.

"I can't get anything under control. Every time I think I have one thing under control something else takes its place. I get up at five am, work until nine at night, kiss the kids, listen to my mother's complaints about me not ever being there to give her the time and attention she needs, eat (if my stomach isn't too knotted up) and go to bed. I fall short at every job I do. My children don't see me enough. My son needs me home working with him doing homework trying to determine if he is dyslexic or ADHD. He suffered through the humiliation in first grade of a teacher telling him he "just isn't getting it" and "this is why you should be held back next year," in front of all his friends in the classroom. No, I am not doing my job for him. My mother is lonely, feels abandoned. Closer and closer to her last days and all she hears from me is I am sorry I have to work. No, I am not doing my job for her. I try to set aside the insistent feeling of incompetence, but can't because it feels like there is always something right there reminding me of things I didn't do for someone who counts on me."

"But the problem isn't really the amount of stuff," I continue. "I could manage that. It is the constant self-deprecation. The constant driving, belittling force that is inside reminding me of all that I am doing wrong. That voice that never lets me breathe because it is always there telling me I fucked up. With every small victory that voice reminds me of three failures. That is what makes it so bad. And I think it got worse as I started studying grief and trauma. The voice shifted. Instead of only belittling me for the things I didn't do, or forgot, it became a voice of derision over everything. It began pointing out my sadness as pathetic, my hardship as pitiful. It began reminding me of all I had heard, and read, the sorrows of others and how mine never compares to that."

CHAPTER FOUR

BORDERLAND IDENTITY: NARRATIVE MEANING AND HASIDIC AUDACITY: TIKKUM OLAM AND REFUSAL TO DESPAIR

Discovering Personal Fractures: Writing to Heal

> The challenge of encountering the chaos narrative is how not to steer the storyteller away from her feeling…If chaos stories are told on the edges of a wound, they are also told on the edges of speech. Ultimately, chaos is told in the silences that speech cannot penetrate or illuminate. (Frank, 1995, p. 101)

A Turn to Writing

In December 2012 I turned to writing, a method I had used for years to overcome troubling events but had moved away from. "Writing gave me a feeling of control…faith I would recover. Writing was the method through which I constituted the world and reconstituted myself…my principle tool through which I learned about myself and the world. I wrote so I would have a life" (Richardson, 2001). Initially I was writing as purgation (Ryden, 2010), I didn't have the intention of using the writing in association with my dissertation. Then I began connecting the suffering I was writing about to the suffering I was reading and hearing about (although certainly not in scale). As I drafted my dissertation I incorporated my loss of faith, my stories of suffering with the survivors I was interviewing. But my stories began to overwhelm theirs.

I am not narcissistic by natue; in fact I am typically self-effacing. Why were my stories taking over? One of the criticisms of autoethnography and narrative writing is they tend toward narcissism. Never as I wrote my stories did I feel like it was because I was self-involved. In fact, I was attempting to write to understand the shifting identity I found myself embracing. With each new discovery my intention was to learn how I could understand the suffering of others more clearly by examining why I was experiencing the suffering. I do believe that as humans, even if I cannot fully understand the suffering of another because I have not experienced the same events, I can at least emapthize with that suffering. Because I too have suffered, even if my suffering has been dramatically less than the other persons' I can understand through similar emotion. Keating, in analyzing the writing of Anzaldúa states:

> Although spiritual activism begins at the level of the individual, it does not result in egocentrism, self-glorification, or other types of possessive individualism. Rather spiritual activists combine self-reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about material change. (Keating, 2006, pg 12)

I had only touched the surface stories of why I was suffering and hadn't yet even dipped into the core of it. I believed the trauma I had experienced was brought on by reading and interviewing Holocaust survivors with incredibly painful stories, a sort of vicarious traumatization, increased by the challenging time in my own life of working two jobs, being a mom of four children, caring for my parents and trying to write my dissertation. But that didn't seem to explain everything. It almost seemed like "too easy" an explanation. But at the time I wasn't able to articulate a more reasonable explanation for descending into the depths as I had.

There is such a vast amount of research that has been done spanning various fields as diverse as Psychology, Narrative Medicine, Therapy, Self-Help, Addiction Research and Recovery, Family Counseling, Communication, Religion, Sociology, Pedagogy Studies (with a focus on English and Writing/Narrative), Cultural Studies (including movements for Social Change), Holocaust Research, among many other fields and sub-fields of research.

Louise DeSalvo (1999) claims, "Writing that describes traumatic or distressing events in detail and how we felt about these events then and feel about them now is the only kind of writing about trauma that clinically has been associated with improved health" (25). Following are examples of writing to heal in the literature across varying fields. Many scholars embracing autoethnography and narrative either make the claim that narrative writing can be a path for the healing process, or use the method of narrative writing to heal (Boylorn, 2009; Berry, 2006; Bochner, 2012; Coles, 1989; DeSalvo, 1999; Ellis, 1995; Ellis, 1999; Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2008; Pelias, 2004; Poulos, 2009; Poulos, 2012; Rambo, 1995; Rambo, 2007; Richardson, 1994; Richardson, 2001; Rosenthal, 2003; Smith, 2012; & Tillmann-Healy, 1996, as examples). The use of writing to heal as a pedagogical tool (especially in college courses, although there is literature on K-12 as well) has brought to the forefront questions of the efficacy and the potential ethical considerations for the instructors. Whether the tool is sufficient and worth the risk turns most of the researchers back to the Pennebaker (1990, 1997) study beginning in the 1980's that supports the positive effects over time of writing structured narratives to heal (Anderson, Holt, & McGady, 2000; Antzoulis, 2003; Hurley-Moran, 2004; Ryden, 2010).

The second issue that often arises is how the instructors, who are not themselves psychologists, are to ethically manage potentially critical situations of deep personal pain

and trauma from a student writing project (two strong examples dealing with many of the ethical questions that come up when using personal writing in the classroom are Jeffrey Berman's Risky Writing, 2001 and Charles M. Anderson and Marian MacCurdy (eds.) Writing and Healing: Toward and Informed Practice; Refiguring English Studies, 2000, see also Joseph and Rickett, 2010).

Other fields include narrative medicine which include discussions on the cathartic nature of illness stories for those writing them and the readers (Anderson, 2000; Charon, 2006; Frank, 1995; Groopman, 2000; Harter and Bochner, 2009; & Sayantani and Charon, 2004 as examples), counseling and Psychology discussing the impacts of writing to work through traumatic events in therapy (Andersson and Conley, 2008; Littrell, 2009; Pennebaker, 1997; Smyth, True, & Souto, 2001; Sznuguero, 2009, & Wright, 2009), addiction recovery (Springer, 2006), scriptotherapy (Riordan, 1996), on-line therapy using writing as a tool to communicate with your therapist (Wright, 2002) specifically called "therap-e-mail" by Lawrence J. Murphy and Dan L. Mitchell (2007), and even bereavement studies (Dennison, 1999; Hendel, 1990). Along with these examples there are also increasing examples of marginalized peoples (including women of color) using writing, through poetry, autobiography, memoirs, and fiction to heal. The example I have drawn on throughout my dissertation is Gloria Anzaldúa, but there are other examples as well (Fahey, 2007).

The seminal research by Pennebaker (1990) examined the effects of writing on participants' well-being. While the initial research did show immediate negative effects of writing about difficult topics, Pennebaker showed over time the result of writing about traumatic experiences was positive. Pennebaker's result seems to have been consistently

reinforced in literature. "I've had many wounds to heal, and I've done much writing to heal them, and in the process I've discovered a rich, deeply textured life I hadn't before recognized" (DeSalvo, 6). Judith Harris (2003) in delineating the importance of writing to heal in reflection on DeSalvo and MacCurdy's works states, "The act of translating experience into words forces some kind of structure onto the experiences themselves…Hence, key to the healing process is linking memory with emotion, allowing the intensity of feelings to emerge at the time an event is reestablished through writing" (Harris, 12). Coupling the aforementioned ideas of the researcher embarking on research that is inherently subjective with the idea of writing to heal, the researcher potentially becomes the research subject at hand. As the researcher uses writing to explore subjects that may have a therapeutic effect it can simultaneously be incredibly difficult. "Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore, well that's when the real work has only begun" (Ellis, 1999, p. 672).

While the outcome of the writing may eventually have positive implications what are the dangers of the process of writing through the emotions and experiences? Carolyn Ellis, in describing the type of writing involved in Final Negotiations, claims, "This strategy meant revealing my flaws and bad decisions as well as my strengths and good judgments" (Ellis, 1996, p. 152). To write cathartically one must also write honestly. To do less would be a waste of the process. Yet, in that honestly there is raw and painful emotionality that can be overwhelming. Charles Anderson (2000) speaks of writing to heal as a "safe" experience because one is able to step away if the writing becomes too traumatic.

The overall consensus is that writing is cathartic and does have an established therapeutic effect. But a distinction must be made about the private nature of the writing

experience. Cases of writing about trauma in a distinctly therapeutic setting, for example the Pennebaker studies, as Wendy Ryden (2010) indicates, is a private and thereby safe experience. Ryden calls this the "purgation model." She claims of Pennebaker's model, "This approach seems to imply a healing model of catharsis based on writers' uninhibitedly purging themselves of pent up emotions irrespective of audience" (Ryden, 2010, p. 245). To Ryden the very challenge of Pennebaker's model is that "…he cites research that suggests the only time writing is not healing is when it is shared with others because they may not receive the writing in a manner empowering to its author (Writing 12)" (Ryden, 245). Ryden is making a case for using therapeutic writing in a "public" setting, in the case of this study an oral history project titled "StoryCorps." Challenging to her model though is that it requires an empathetic audience. Ryden (2010) claims, "Here the audience is configured as an ethical community whose role is to bear witness to the words of suffering or other human experience articulated by the writer" (248). In terms of writing classrooms this is a distinct and unique possibility. By providing students with guidelines for being ethical and compassionate listeners it is possible to create an engaging environment that allows for "recognition" rather than "purgation." The challenge to this model of an empathic audience emerges once one decides to not only use their work in a public space, but publish that work where the audience is unknown. Carolyn Ellis (1996) states, "When writers make their lives public in print, they offer those lives up to be talked about, scrutinized, and sensationalized" (164).

The initial response to the aforementioned challenge seems simple. If the writing process is made more difficult by having an unknown audience, or if writing about personal trauma in a public space has the potential to re-traumatize the individual, the simple

answer is don't do it. Use therapeutic writing, cathartic writing in a private (purgation) space that has less potential for harm to self. Yet, it has also been well documented that researchers rarely do research that isn't personal. Laurel Richardson (2001) states:

> *People who write are always writing about their lives*, even when they disguise this through the omniscient voice of science or scholarship. No writing is untainted by human hands, pure, objective, 'innocent.' The old idea of a strict bifurcation between 'objective; and 'subjective' – between the 'head' and the 'heart' – does not map onto the actual practices through production of knowledge, or knowledge about how knowledge is produced. (Richardson, 2001, 34)

Knowledge of personal experiences such as coping with illness of self or other, grief or loss of someone, stigmatization, sexual abuse, eating disorders, (Antzoulis, 2003; Bochner, 2002; Bochner, 2014; Butler and Rosenblum, 1991; Ellis, 1996; Ellis, 1995; Ellis 1993; Hurley-Moran 2004; Jago, 2005; Rambo Ronai, 1995; Richardson, 2001; Richardson 2007; Smith, 2012; & Tillman-Healy, 1996), would not be understood in the same way if not for the courageous acts of the researchers willing to dig into the depths of their own lives and expose their wounds for an unseen and unpredictable audience. But that doesn't mean it is easy, and it certainly doesn't mean that there aren't risks, or that they did it without sustaining harm (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Jago, 2002, Joseph & Rickett, 2010; Richardson, 2001; Tamas, 2009; Tamas 2012 Woodstock, 2001).

Interrogating what I see as the risks and benefits of the process of writing *through* suffering, as opposed to writing in the aftermath of suffering, I look at April Chatham-Carpenter (2010), Joseph & Rickett (2010), Carol Ronai (1995, 1996, 1997) and Barbara Jago (2002) as examples in order to reconcile the experience. April Chatham-Carpenter

(2010), who examined her life with anorexia through autoethnography, asks the question, "Is the pain involved for me as the storyteller too much to make the storytelling worthwhile?" (p. 9). She argues that autoethnographic research often focuses on the need to protect the participants but does not often address the care of self in the process. Chatham-Carpenter's question must be contextualized by her first statement in the article that her story is about, "…how the compulsion to get published and the compulsion of my eating disorder became intertwined, teaching me about the ethics of doing an autoethnography on a topic that can harm a researcher's well-being" (2). She references early in the article that her therapist warned her against using her experiences as data so soon after getting out of treatment. Chatham-Carpenter (2010) claimed initially she felt in control, but realized she was being personally impacted. Chatham-Carpenter (2010) explains:

> To make the benefits from doing this work greater than the costs, I needed to protect not only the people I was writing about, but also myself as an autoethnographer. I have learned more about how to do that, using writing to uncover the pages of my life in such a way that I could be ethically open and honest and real, waiting until I was in a good enough space to write over time…(9-10)

Her initial response was to set aside her data and personal stories on anorexia determining there was too much potential for personal damage. What she found was her drive to be published drove her to return to the topic. Chatham-Carpenter acknowledges "…this did not silence the voice of my publishing obsession, who was in love with my anorexia" (4). She returned to the project and completed it, claiming, "The new found freedom from these twin compulsions came from writing through my pain, separating the

voice of anorexia from my voice, publishing my story, and dealing with other factors going on in my life at the time…" (9). While Chatham-Carpenter had to learn her boundaries for struggling to write about very private and difficult topics (such as being in the right frame of mind to write, time between the event and writing, and a healthy support system, p. 10) she does claim a catharsis. She says:

> With the publication came self-disclosure to persons who would normally not have access to such private revelations. Perhaps this is another reason why anorexia is not as attractive option as before…In the hiding was a perceived sense of control, but in the open, the compulsions have lost some of their power. Autoethnography bestowed on me the privilege of that openness. (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010, p. 10)

Joseph and Rickett (2010) also question the ethical nature of writing to heal, not only for those writing the project, but for the educator guiding the project. For the purposes here I will focus on their comments regarding the writing of the project. Rather than questioning whether the method is efficacious, Joseph and Rickett (2010) question whether it is ethical to use the method to obtain a degree. Their focus "is to raise questions around the ethics of commodifying trauma as a means of gaining a higher degree. One of our primary concerns is the potentially dangerous space it can create for both the academic and the student" (3). While they raise this significant question the article focuses more on the position of the academic who may be traumatized by the student's project. It becomes clear throughout the article that the example they are using was not caused through the student writing about her traumatic experiences, but rather an in-class speaker that evoked a powerful emotional response in the student, after which the student ended up in a psychiatric unit for a period of time. When she returned to school the academic then

invited the student to write about her experiences. This alone seems to me verging on ethically questionable, since the academic *is aware* the student was in a psychiatric facility because of the memories triggered by the in class presentation. Furthermore, in editing the manuscript the academic "…in an editorial role, felt it was necessary to ask the student if she could revisit actual incidents of abuse and repackage them within the narrative" (Joseph and Rickett, 2010, 6). Again, from my limited perspective, this is verging on unethical with all the above considerations as well as the acknowledgment that the academic was not in the position of therapist. Finally the article also focused on the importance of vicarious traumatization of the academic by her exposure to the reading of the student's manuscript for editing. I do think the questions posed by the authors are valid and significant, but I do not think they overwhelm the research claiming the benefits of writing to heal.

Examination of potential challenges of therapeutic writing raises questions about whether writing is necessarily cathartic. Carol Ronai (1995, 1996, 1997) recounts in her research her life with her mentally disabled mother as well as Ronai's sexual abuse at the hands of her mother and father. Her work is honest, painful, sickening, enlightening, open, and therapeutic for those who have had similar experiences. However, reinforcing the point of the difficulty of writing works that are connected to painful events or times, Ronai in her 1995 article *Multiple reflections of child sex abuse: An argument for a layered account* has a break in the text at one point and claims:

> It is inane to be as profoundly ashamed of what happened next as I am, but I could throw up recalling the emotions attached to it. If I focus inward I can feel the nausea as a fluid reality in the center of my gut. I have had to stop, take deep breaths, and

> force myself to go on…Now I must catch my breath; my chest is tightening involuntarily. I can't focus inward to describe this because that is making it worse. My nausea turns into hot acrid bile I can taste in the back of my throat. (Ronai, 1995, 403)

This statement exposes the severe physical and emotional trauma that accompanied the writing of that segment. Why does she continue with such a traumatic writing experience? Is the writing cathartic? It is difficult to imagine writing that results in that emotionality to be therapeutic. But, maybe the purpose of therapeutic or cathartic writing is not purely for the benefit of the author.

Barbara Jago (2002), who chronicles her experiences living with depression in academia, claims, "Committing these details to paper; putting my self (sic) on display; sharing my pain with family, friends, and colleagues; risking personal and professional humiliation, I wonder how you will read these stories…Am I undermining my credibility?" (738). She goes on to discuss a reviewer of her work that warned her against publishing because there was potential of damage to her career (753). Yet to Jago (2002), "If I am writing for any reason, it is to demystify and demythologize depression; the best way to promote understanding and fight ignorance is to speak out, to make my version of the story part of the permanent record" (754). Jago's words resonate with my experience. They also resonate with my understanding of why Jewish Holocaust survivors write and tell their stories.

Teria Shantall (2002) claims Holocaust survivors tell their stories so as not to forget the memories of those who were lost (93), to "activate the world's conscience" (92), and to try to make meaning of their experiences (94) which is often through ensuring it never

happen again. Elie Wiesel states, "I write more than ever. I pause at every page: That which I have just written, have I not said it elsewhere? And I go on writing because I cannot do otherwise" (1999, 5). Like Wiesel, Miller, DeSalvo, Ronai, Ellis, Bochner, Walker, Perkins Gilman, and so very many others, there is no choice but to write. Writing is cathartic even if you are NOT healed by the experience, but because there is something to offer to others. You're driven by the hope that you can demystify or demythologize difficult subjects.

In essence I place myself in the position of writing myself "into the dungeon before you get out." How can someone write through their suffering and protect themselves while they are doing it? I argue the act of writing does not actually open the wound. *The wound exists.* The more my mind analyzes with no outlet the more infected the wound becomes. In fact, by *not* writing about it, not facing the problem, it worsens and eventually that wound begins to take over what was a fairly healthy body. I can relate to the Anzaldúa quote that uses the metaphor of the cactus needle that continues to fester as she picks at it until finally she is able to articulate and release the needle only to eventually find a new needle that has taken up residence. "I've had many wounds to heal, and I've done much writing to heal them, and in the process I've discovered a rich, deeply textured life I hadn't before recognized" (DeSalvo, 6).

Discovering Alienation: Writing to (Re) Invent

> To be *alienated* is to be a stranger to oneself. We live in a world of ideological conflict in which far too many individuals…practice a 'centered theology' in which they are too sure of who they are and what they must do. Such a world has far too

> many answers and not nearly enough questions and self-questioning…However, when we are willing to become strangers to ourselves (or when we unwillingly become so), new possibilities open up where before everything was closed and hopeless (Fasching, 1993, p. 6).

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Transitional Journey Begins

Richard Rubenstien has been perceived historically as the "death of God" theologian. Perhaps a more accurate description of his argument is that the perception of the God as the God of Abraham died at Auschwitz and that people needed to re-conceptualize God. Rubenstein argues that regardless of the perception of God people need rituals to survive communally. Because of that he claims whether or not people continue to follow God they will continue to follow ritual because there is connection in that. He is advocating for a return to a form of pagan mysticism. That pagan mysticism calls less attention to a high God and more attention to the community and their rituals that tie and bind them to the spirits and each other.

Santería, is such a religion, an Afro-Caribbean religion, that emerged in Cuba during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (or Triangular Trade). This religion is a creolized merger of the West African Yoruba and Roman Catholicism. In brief, the religion believes in a high god, Olodumare, and a pantheon of mediators, the orisha, that exist between the humans and the high god. The high god is fairly indifferent to human trouble or need. The orisha are called upon by the people, through ritual, to aid in their everyday well-being. Today, Santería exists in many forms, some resembling the West African practices more directly

and discarding much of the Roman Catholic religion that was originally overlaid and eventually became intertwined. Other forms of Santería exist as it emerged, a syncretized religion. There is no organizational hierarchy that determines correct practice for the whole of the religion giving each ilé, or temple, the freedom to practice as its babalao or high priest, or santero or santera (priest or priestess) deem appropriate.

> Santería is a this-worldly religion whose focus is on bringing health, wealth, happiness and all the good things in life to devotees and others. So the response is not to attempt to assign some sort of blame to either the deities or to the victims, but to work to restore the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being to the survivors. (Clark, 2005, p. 80)

Much of the practice of Santería focuses on ritualized action that provides the human with a certain amount of control over their own existence and well-being. I noticed a number of Botánicas (shops containing religious items) daily driving my children to school. I was curious about them but knew I was too busy to allow distraction. The pull continued to intensify until eventually I decided to stop at one I felt particularly drawn to.

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Spring 2013

I walk into the Botánica that I have been noticing for months on my way to my kid's school. I have felt pulled to this one, even though I pass five or six of them on my various routes around Tampa to work, driving the kids to school, etc.

Immediately the smell accosts my senses. I not only smell it, but I can feel it on the back of my tongue. Incense, cigar smoke, cigarette smoke, and something I can't quite place,

almost animalistic. Altars scattered throughout the shop on the concrete floor show recent offerings, some with lit cigars, some with small pools of drying blood and bird feathers.

The man behind the counter nods at me and I nod my head back at him and begin wandering around the small store. Various statues of Catholic Saints, candles, and ritual items in baskets line the shelves and floor behind the altars. Behind the counter hang multi-colored beads made into necklaces. Glass cases hold different trinkets, as well as good luck charms, and small containers of various powders.

"Do you have red brick dust?" I ask the man.

"Española?"

I shake my head. He puts his hand up and picks up a phone, dials a number, speaks into it and then hands it to me.

"Hello," a woman says.

"Hi, I was trying to find out if the shop carries red brick dust?"

"Ok, put him back on the phone," she says. They talk a moment and he hands the phone back to me.

"How much do you want?"

"Well, I want to line my house. How much would it take?"

"Let me talk to him."

They confer, he hands me the phone, "He says he doesn't have enough but if you come back tomorrow he can get it."

"Ok, do you know how much?"

"He says it will be about $2 per container. But if you want to do your whole house you will need a lot, probably fifteen containers."

"Wow, ok. How big are the containers?"

"Do you see in the glass case the medicine bottle with the powder in it?"

"Yes," I say.

"That's the size."

"Ok, please let him know I will be back tomorrow to pick it up."

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Gathering various religious relics to show my classes I travel to a local Indian market to pick up a Puja kit, or a worship kit. I decided to try a different Botánica and wander into another local shop. As I walk in the woman behind the counter abruptly cuts off her conversation with the woman sitting next to her. The woman behind the counter is clearly uncomfortable I am there. Santería is a discreet religion due to negative media attention; most outsiders are viewed with skepticism and fear. Attempting to ease the woman's mind I ask if she minds if I look around. She hesitates. I explain I teach a course at the University and want to purchase something to show my students related to Santería. She nods allowing me to roam the store, under her watchful eye.

On a shelf among various statue representations of the Orisha I see a collection of cement heads with cowrie shell eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. I ask the woman if these are for Eleguá. Again hesitating she nods. There is one that is different with a circle of alternating green and yellow beads on his forehead. After looking over the shelf I wander through the store looking at the different artifacts. I am drawn back to the cement head with the beads in the forehead. I gently lift it from the shelf. As soon as it is in my hands I know it is what I will purchase, feeling like it belongs to me already. My Eleguá was simply waiting until the time was right, until I was ready to feel the pull.

After purchasing my Eleguá I decide to go back to the Botánica that I had felt so drawn to in the first place. I was beginning to feel comfortable there. Even the exotic smells are alluring. The bell on the door jingles, Tony nods to me, recognizing me now so I nod back. Not sure why I am there or what I want I begin to wander waiting for something to call to me.

Some Santería practitioners believe that only a Babalao, a specialized priest, can tell a person what orisha owns them. Some believe a Santero or a Santera, a male or female priest, can determine that. I felt certain I already knew who owned me, Eleguá, Papa Legba, the opener of the crossroads, the messenger between the high god and the humans. I felt pulled to him, connected.

Even prior to picking the cement head in the other Botánica I recognized that I felt connected to Eleguá. What I really want from Tony is a set of red and black beads, the ilekes or collares. The various colored beads signify which orisha, or saint, owns each practitioner. The red and black beads worn by a practitioner would indicate they are owned by Eleguá. Beads are sacrosanct and only received at the completion of initiation so instead I buy a small good luck/protection charm with black and red beads with a cowrie shell on each end representing him.

Walking out of Tony's shop that afternoon I remember standing in the National History Museum in Washington D.C. in 2005 in a small area dedicated to African religions. There was an image of the crossroads on the floor. Standing at the center of the crossroads there, even in a Museum setting, I felt strong, centered, clear.

While initially the purchase of the Eleguá charm was to show my class, fairly rapidly I began carrying the charm with me at all times. I found myself asking Eleguá to please

open the roads and help me when things became overwhelming. My Eleguá has the alternating yellow and green beads on his forehead representative of the Orisha Orula the great diviner. In terms of this artifact, Eleguá, the opener of the crossroads has Orula, the great diviner, embedded in him, guiding him.

Now, feeling more lost than I have in my life I found myself connecting to a religion I had never considered…ever.

Spring 2013

"Hey mom?" My daughter calls.

"Yeah?"

"I just have to know," a sly grin on her face.

"What?"

"Is that red brick dust across the back door?"

She chuckles as I nod. "Don't let Mo know, she'll flip," she says of her devout Catholic grandmother that lives with us.

May 3, 2013

I carried the Eleguá good luck charm with me everywhere for about three weeks. Everything had become increasingly difficult around me. Despite my writing, I was stalling out again; going nowhere. Suicidal thoughts were dominating again. I gave in; I went back to the Botánica.

"Do you speak English?" I ask immediately upon entering.

The man in the red silky basketball shirt and shorts behind the counter looks at me strangely, holding up his hand indicating I should wait. He calls Tony who walks out giving me the typical nod.

I look back at the other man, “Do you speak English?”

He looks at Tony who nods toward me. “A little,” the man says.

“I need help. I need to know if something like this,” I put the Eleguá charm on the counter, “works if you haven’t been initiated. I feel like I am being pulled or connected or something to Eleguá, but I don’t know if it works that way if you haven’t been initiated. Is there a santero or a babalawo that can tell me why I feel so drawn to Eleguá? I just, I need help,” I stop talking. Both men are staring at me speechless.

Finally the man in the red shirt put his hand up, “Hold on, I have to get my wife.”

He dials a number, speaks into the phone and then hands it to me. I explain again to the woman on the phone, then hand it back to the man in the red shirt. He then hands the phone to Tony who listens and says something to her in Spanish. Handing the phone back to me Tony stands looking at me with a mildly concerned face.

“He says they can’t help you. The man of your sign, that has to help you, can be there in an hour.”

“Ok, I can be back in an hour,” I say not questioning what that means or who she is talking about. This is my first real foray into a religion I know intellectually, not emotionally. I know I have not felt connected to religion at all for years and have felt no need to be in a religious environment until I began to feel pulled to this store.

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Tony nods at me when I walk back in an hour later and says something to the man in the red shirt. He goes into the back and gets a folding chair and unfolds it along the wall of the store.

“Fredo isn’t here yet,” he says and points to the chair.

Shortly after I sit down another man arrives dressed in all white, clearly an initiate. He doesn't acknowledge me as he walks past. A few other people trickle in and head into the back room. No one speaks directly to me and I can't understand what they are saying.

I am growing increasingly uncomfortable. Shifting in my chair, cutting my eyes toward the back room, I wonder if they are playing a joke on me.

About twenty minutes later I hear the back door open and greetings taking place. All of a sudden the people who were laughing, talking, and being rowdy in the back room file respectfully out through the front of the store and Tony waves me back.

The santero that has come to meet with me laid a mat on the concrete floor in front of the wall size altar. Frequently used, the altar is stained with blood and has relics for different orishas. Fredo is on his knees and gestures for me to take my shoes off pointing to a folding chair across from him. We are very close; I can barely sit in the chair without bumping into him. He gestures that I should point my knees toward him and put my bare feet on the mat. Fredo pulls out beans, cowrie shells, and various other shaped shells. As he begins chanting he shakes the shells and beans in his hands and rubs them together.

Through the female interpreter Fredo tells me to list my dead, because in Santería the ancestors or egún must be honored even before the orishas. Unprepared I stumble through the names of my grandmother and grandfather. He then opens by calling on the orishas, beginning with Eleguá to open the crossroads, and then moving through the rest paying honor to the orishas.

Fredo begins the consulta or consult by tossing a variety of the beans and shells on the mat, picking them back up, rubbing them together between his hands and tossing them again. This is based on an age old method of divination, dilogún. Santería practitioners

believe the orishas use the santeros and babalawos to communicate with the practitioners through divination.

He then gestures to my hand and places a small number of the beans and shells in my hand and shows me to roll them together and give them back to him. Each time he does this he provides me another insight from the orisha communicating with me.

Fredo tells me a number of times throughout the consulta there is something wrong with my heart, that it isn't good, and that I needed to tend to it. He continues returning to my health saying that there is something wrong with my stomach and heart region and that even if the doctors say there is nothing I need to keep pursuing it because I may not even feel pain but something is there. Fredo also tells me I need to have my eyes checked because I'm not seeing things "right" with my eyes.

Fredo tells me to ask Eleguá a question or for help. I ask him to please open the road to help me finish my dissertation.

Fredo tells me everything I am trying to do isn't working because my path is blocked. I need to accept my saint. Accepting the saint means to accept the orisha that "owns your head" and take on the responsibility of the Santería faith. I know this means an initiation ceremony, including the sacrifice of an animal. As an aspiring scholar I accept that the faith uses animal sacrifice, but I have a difficult time seeing myself becoming a practitioner of a religion that requires me to shed the blood of an animal.

He tells me he is the same sign as me and it is both positive and negative. There are a lot of negative health problems that come with the sign of Eleguá. He has confirmed my sense that Eleguá owned me. According to Fredo having the sign of Eleguá comes with challenges as well as protection. Eleguá is mischievous and difficult. Fredo goes on to

reemphasize that I need to accept my saint, but that the most important thing to accepting my saint was faith. I have to have faith. The translator explains that accepting the saint can help tremendously, but nothing is a "fix it" or a "cure" that only God from above can do that, but you have to have faith.

A consulta costs $25. Near the end Fredo asks me for the money. I pull it out and hand it to him. He shakes his head and gestures for me to cross myself with it and place it on the mat. I do as he asks. He picks up the money, kisses it and hands it back to me. Confused I look to the translator. She tells me that Fredo says because he and I are the same sign he cannot take my money. I ask if that means I should give it to the store directly, she says no that he is not able to accept the money at all. He did it for me because we are of the same sign.

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Trembling, I leave the Botánica. While I am not certain what I was expecting, the experience was far beyond anything I had imagined. My mind a miasma I pulled out my phone and called the one person I felt could give me guidance in that moment, a friend from my Religious Studies graduate classes.

"Hi Max. Are you still a Santero?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Can you help me?"

****

May, 2013

"Tell me what you are here for," Max asks me as he pulls out the deck of cards he will use to conduct the consulta I have requested.

"Well, I was hoping you would do an objective reading and then I could tell you more from there," I say.

"Okay. I have to have some sense of direction."

"I have the next two weeks off both jobs to finish writing and pulling together my dissertation. I went yesterday for a reading with one thought, to open the crossroads and help me finish my dissertation. To get through this process. But what the man told me had nothing to do with what I asked; everything he told me was awful about my life. And about two weeks ago I started carrying this," I say reaching into my pocket and pulling out the small black and red object with cowrie shells sealing each end. I set it on the table in between us.

He picks it up looks at me and says, "Do you know what this is for?"

"Yes, basically it is a good luck charm, but it is associated with the opener of crossroads," I say.

"But you know it doesn't do any good unless you are initiated into the faith, right?"

"That's what I went to ask the man last night, if it was any good or if I was making things worse by carrying it, you know making the universe angry at me. He couldn't answer me without doing a reading so I agreed to do the reading," I say.

"Consulta, that's what he did. Not a reading, a consulta."

"Right. But it was awful. He basically said my entire life, health, everything was awful, nothing about my progress or how to open those roads and make this process easier on me."

"Of course he didn't. You don't get told what you want to hear, you get told what the universe feels like you need to know."

He pushes the cards aside and says, “I can tell you everything without doing a reading.” I nod to him.

“You are getting to the last steps and you are afraid that now someone will figure out you are a fraud,” he says. I inhale sharply.

“Look, Tori, I have known you a long time. You have never had faith in yourself. You have never thought you were good enough to get this far. We all have moments as we go along, standing in front of a classroom, writing a paper, when we think, ‘Shit, here it comes, they are going to realize I am a joke and that I don’t know anything.’ But, here is what you have to remember, did you get your Bachelor’s degree?”

I nod.

“Did you get two Master’s degrees?”

I nod.

“Did you do the coursework to get to this point?”

I nod.

“Okay then. You know how to do this; you just have to finish it. We took classes together. In discussion did you ever have anyone say, ‘Wow you have no idea what you are talking about’?”

I shake my head no slowly.

“So why don’t you have any faith in your ability to do this?”

“Because this is so much harder than I thought. And I don’t mean academically harder. The research is the easy part. Confronting the despair this research has brought up, that is the hard part. I didn’t plan to write about this stuff and it has made the road feel crossed at every turn.”

"Just write it. Get it out," he says.

"What if I can't do it?"

"You believe you can't do it because you are socialized to believe it. You can't be a scholar because you are a woman. You should be home taking care of your children. And that's bullshit. You know it is. You know how you know?"

I shake my head.

"Because you have done it. All you have to do is finish it."

"Look at this," he picks up the cards he was going to use to do the reading, showing me the image of a bird standing on top of a globe with the word Maya printed across it. I nod.

"Maya, illusion. It's all illusion. You know what Hinduism and Buddhism say, all of this is illusion. We search and search to find the path without realizing it is within us. God is in each of us, whatever you name God. There is nothing out there. That is the illusion. Whether it is Hinduism, Buddhism or Santería, they are all in search of that same understanding. The problem is, we as human, don't see that God is in us so we keep searching." We sit in silence while he picks up the black and red charm I have been carrying with me, rolling it between his fingers.

Finally he says, "You don't need this. It is a crutch for people still searching. But you know the answer. Stop searching for some answer in the world outside you. Be the goddess of your world."

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"One has to leave the permanent boundaries of a fixed self, literally "leave" oneself and see oneself through the eyes of the Other" (Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "En rapport, In Opposition").

Right now I cannot be initiated into the religion I feel such a deep connection with. While I can academically and intellectually support the freedom of religious practitioners to sacrifice an animal for religious ritual, I cannot know it was done on my behalf. Because of that I have to find my own path in the religion that speaks to me.

The attraction to me was that sense of ritualized control. Just as Rubenstein claimed, I felt drawn to the idea of being connected through ritual. During the consulta, the santero told me I needed to take my saint. Even this moment made me feel like I had made the correct decision in coming to him and seeking out this new religion. I began thinking about being initiated. I thought I could get past the use of killing to heal if it meant being fully embraced by this religion I felt so drawn to.

After going to see my friend, a santero, who knows me well, he pointed out I was using the ritual actions and objects as a crutch because I was searching for answers that I couldn't find. I was reminded of a Rubenstein comment:

> The very first thing the Guru said to me was: 'You mustn't believe in your own religion; I don't believe in mine. Religions are like the fences that hold young saplings erect. Without the fence the sapling could fall over. When it takes firm root and becomes a tree, the fence is no longer needed. However, most people never lose their need for the fence. (Rubenstein, 2013, p. 1)

I re-examined my attraction to this religion and while I still feel ultimately connected to the African and Afro-Caribbean traditions and to Santería, I have not yet become initiated in the faith and I'm not sure if I ever will. What I do know is that I felt disillusioned by God and wanted to find a way to reconcile a God I imagined as cruel or indifferent with a creator God. I turned in my search for answers back to the Jewish theologians and scholars. I fully knew the suffering experienced by a genocide survivor was far greater than anything I could possibly know. I began to feel the answers to any and all kinds of suffering may be found in the post-Holocaust theologians.

All religions have undergone growth and change based on influence from outside. The African and Caribbean religions were open to certain change because they were driven into secrecy. The people practiced from memory to re-build community and hope, primarily through ritual and spiritual connection. My love of ritual, my sense of spiritual connection through those rituals provides a place for me in religion when I thought I had lost any sense of place.

Displaced from my earliest religion of Christianity I turned to the Judaic model for answers. A tradition that questioned God on behalf of the suffering of creation seemed more relevant to me than the tradition I was raised in that often resorted to "God has a plan." While I found beauty in Judaism's willingness to question God I still found I wasn't satisfied by "God's" responses. As many survivors of the Holocaust said, in the face of the horrors of human suffering, and the Holocaust, God is either indifferent to the world and allows it to happen, or God is not all-powerful. If God allows the suffering to continue it means God is indifferent. If God is not indifferent and cares about creation then God must not be all-powerful. While there are other responses, that God suffers with creation, that

still raises the prominent question, Why? Why does God allow suffering and then suffer with creation?

There is beauty in a tradition that affords humans a certain autonomy over their lives and provides aid through intercessors. The nature of African traditions is that I am able to recognize that the intercessors can help if I ask and offer appropriate veneration. But they are not God. God is removed from the lives of humans, a resting God. Less power is placed at the feet of a God that has no interest in the affairs of humans allowing for an explanation to suffering that does not involve the divine. Humans suffer because people make selfish choices and God does not get involved because God is far removed from human affairs. Morality is not dualistic so there is no clear right and wrong.

This adaptable form of religion has embraced me through its protean nature. I do not feel badly taking pieces of it without taking it all. I feel comfortable offering veneration without feeling the need to be initiated into the faith. Uniquely the tradition has allowed for variations in history because of slavery, forced Christianity, domination, oppression, silencing, and even now marginalization by outside society.

While there are certain aspects I am saddened by, I do not have a santero/a or a babalawo I can go to and ask questions, I cannot don the beads of an initiate, I will never be considered part of the community. I accept that knowing that I have found aspects of religious life, rituals in religions, that give me a sense of calm. A sense of peace.

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Over the last five years I have spent time obsessed with thanatos, the God of death. Becoming overwhelmed in a state of sorrow for not only my own hardship, but immersed in a world of the suffering of others that is overpowering, I began to dismiss my own

difficulties as not only petty but offensive in the face of the trauma genocide survivors have experienced. Andrea Nikki (2001) states, "…trauma-related disorder is a rational response of a mind subjected to intense psychological stress in the same way that cancer is a body's meaningful and intelligible response to a toxic physical environment…" (82). She goes on to state, "Such self-inflicted injury might be thought of as irrational, or senseless. However, from the perspective of those engaging in it, it is a method of self-preservation that substitutes physical pain for unbearable emotional pain and produces a sense of calm" (Nikki, 2001, 87). In the absence of being able to change the world, emotional pain can become unbearable. Trying to distance myself from the questions I had to ask…Where was God when Ella watched babies being thrown into a fire? Where was God when Hannah's sister was being raped? Where was God when 11.5 million people died? Where is God now while in Africa people are continuing to die today because of genocidal attacks? And where is God as I sit and ask these questions, crying, feeling lost?

In my case, the secondary challenge was after recognizing the state I was in, that I was ready to destroy my biological being in place of the necessary spiritual transformation, unfortunately I couldn't figure out the next step. Just recognizing the need for the spiritual face of death does not mean knowing how to make that happen. I continued to struggle and became more engaged with thanatos as I realized I knew the problem but had no solution. What stopped me at each turn was one statement in Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying, "Have you talked to your family?" What are my obligations to my loved ones, extending from my family to my friends to include the faculty and advisors I care so deeply about? I was fully able to say I know what I needed; a transition, but I didn't know how to make that happen. I was then, and to a large degree still

am now, incapable of letting go of that part of my identity shaped by others' expectations of me. Because I can't evolve and change within the boundaries of that self-perception, the perception itself must change to allow room for growth and re-definition. But that is easier said than done.

Upon reading an early draft of my dissertation one of my advisors forwarded an important critique of my story as it is offered here. I had choices at many junctures. I could have chosen to change my circumstances.

> …yet I never get a sense of much reflection. Are you living the best life you could? Making the best decisions you might? What do you have a right to expect for yourself and what responsibilities do you owe others? Are there other ways to live? My sense is that you just put your head down and plough ahead, hoping you can get it all done, without slowing down to seriously consider alternatives (for example, public school for your children) – or always the costs…You seem to just hope that somehow it will all come together and when it doesn't you experience a loss of meaning and at least consider a way out… (Ellis, 12/31/13)

The critique is significant for two reasons. First, this critique made me realize I had not shown the amount of reflection I had done about every single choice I had made. No decision was made with the simple intent of hoping to make it through every day. Rather every decision (whether to leave my children in their school, whether to pick up a second job, whether to continue with my education, what I would do if I quit my education) came with such intense reflection that eventually I became incapable of even being able to pick something to eat without self-analysis. Eventually it got to the point that doubt and self-deprecation invaded even the simplest choices I made. Unfortunately, over the course of

time that constant self-doubt leads to the escalation of suffering in and of itself without external events to intensify the experience.

Second, it is an absolutely valid point that I have had choices over the last five years of my life. There were things I could have done. For example, I have continued to work seventy to eighty hours a week for over two years because I was determined to keep my children in the private school they are in, even after my husband lost his job October 2013. I certainly could have chosen to remove my children from their school. This is important because it does show the control I have over my suffering whereas the people I am interviewing had no control over the tragic situation they were in.

I was continuing to conduct interviews with Holocaust survivors, reading survivor memoirs, and conducting research on various aspects of the Holocaust. Despite the difficulties we as a family were having because of my mother continuously being ill, financial hardship that is par for the course of most graduate students, and raising four children, my family was ultimately as dedicated as I have been to seeing me through to the completion of my degree.

As is the case with many people in the process of furthering their education there is always a balance that has to be struck between finishing the degree that is so important to them and not causing harm in the process to the family that loves and supports them. This is especially true when those that love and support you are not only adults, but children who count on you to care and provide for them. How much should my children sacrifice because of the choices I have made? Alongside that is the knowledge at every juncture you are one step closer to finishing. The challenge that comes with that knowledge is constantly living in the shadow of "if we can just hold on a little longer." But every stage of the process

comes with its own difficulties, especially when you study a topic such as I have that also affects you psychologically. In turn I found myself in a paradox constantly believing I was getting progressively closer to completion, something I have worked collectively eleven years towards, but could not bring myself to ask anyone in my family to sacrifice any more than they were already sacrificing.

As this process continued and the light at the end of the tunnel moved farther instead of closer, I found myself experiencing what Søren Kierkegaard describes as 'sickness unto death,' or St. John of the Cross describes as the 'Dark Night of the Soul.'

> Aroused through trauma or stark confrontation with one's mortality as it may be, the Dark Night of the Soul also presents a window of opportunity for quantum spiritual growth. 'The dark night of the soul is a way of initiation, a process through which we surrender, deepen and cleanse the soul. It is a ceremony through which we die to all our illusions and enter into Life. Only when the sun is eclipsed can the unaided eye see the sun's corona. The dark night of the soul is the meeting with the Divine that calls for the relinquishing of the small, separate self. (Harvey 2002, p. 115). (qtd in Hartman and Zimberoff 2006 p. 15)

Couple all of this with the intense understanding that for me quitting is not an option. Deciding that different choices need to be made and I should stop school would mean in essence telling my family that all the sacrifices we had made together were for nothing. Along with that, I'm convinced there is nothing else in the world I am capable of doing well. When I was eighteen and began college I couldn't decide on a major. My mother asked me, "What do you have a fire in your belly for?" At eighteen I told her very matter of factly, "Nothing." After finishing my Master's degree in Religious Studies, a Master's Degree

in Criminology, and the seven years I have spent working toward my Ph.D. in Communication I can say, without hesitation and without a doubt, that what I have a fire for is ensuring I communicate to the world about the spiritual and relational consequences of genocide.

The significance in detailing my perspective is simply to show that while I have had choices, for me there is no real choice. I must do what I'm doing. And like anyone else who is a non-traditional student, trying to raise children, working to support her family, and finish her education because she honestly believes what she is doing matters, I do know that if I "put my head down and plough ahead" eventually I will finish. When I do finish the sense of accomplishment is not mine alone, but also my family who helped emotionally support me through the educational process. I know that my family values not only my education, but the information I impart to the students I teach because they see how hard I have worked for the right to be able to teach.

The internal struggle that has gone into every decision we as a family and I as an individual have made, escalated the disintegration. Each new challenge brought a new level of struggle over whether we should make different choices, how to make them and, who would be most affected. In the end every decision was made with one statement, "Look how far you have come, we can hold out a little longer. We will figure it out." This escalates the internal pressure to complete a project that is based purely on ability to think, which is increasingly difficult the more exhausted and worn down your body is. Yet every week that passes the pressure increases. "We can hold on a little longer," whispered in the back of my mind leading to a breaking point when I felt like I was no longer in control because I felt

stilted in the decision making process. No choice is a good responsible choice, so you plough ahead.

Immersed in stories of utter destruction from the survivors I was interviewing, the memoirs I was reading, and the research I was buried in, the constant self-annihilation builds because you're hardest choice is how to, "Hold on a little longer," until I found myself sitting the a shower, razor in my hand, getting ready to carve the word 'Sorry' in my skin because I couldn't make a good choice for all involved. It is at that point I realized I had no choice but to begin trying to make the transition I knew was necessary. Now the transition is not the end goal, but a process, one step at a time.

Allow me to qualify. Just as we find with A. Alvarez, it is an unsatisfying resolution. "We all expect something of death, even if it's only damnation. But all I got was oblivion…Why had I been so sure of finding some kind of answer?"(Alvarez, 1970, 280-281). I acknowledge here what I work toward every day, but recognize that I am not there. Unfortunately, this type of research does not finish with a ribbon and bow because life is messy. Sophie Tamas (2009) claims, "Clean and reasonable scholarship about messy, unreasonable experience is an exercise in alienation" (4). Very rarely are there clean dramatic conclusions especially in work with human emotion. In fact, I echo Tamas' statement, "My work needs to be unsanitary, compromised, because otherwise it compounds my injuries" (5). The best is to hope for steps of reintegration and the recognition that (as my committee succinctly stated) we don't trust anyone who says they are reintegrated, it is a continual process, a journey. "Life is messy, riddled with gaps, contradictions, and discontinuities. Our stories about life necessarily are incomplete and

open to revision (Ellis, 2009). Dealing with life is more important than explaining it," (Bochner, 2014, pg 23).

So, what to do with all that I have gained? As a mother, teacher, graduate student, aspiring scholar, mentor, wife, and advocate my journey is one other people can relate to. My journey has been one of loss of meaning, loss of faith, and descent into despair. The process of (re)making meaning by being able to recognize, and most importantly face, my own suffering and be self-reflexive about that suffering can resonate with others who have experienced suffering. Whether we share similarity of experience someone reading my story that has experienced suffering of their own will recognize the progression of suffering I experienced as well as the meaning making process. The individual may then be able to embrace self-reflexivity in their own lives as well. At the very least the loss of meaning and (re)gaining hope can resonate with others and encourage hope in others as well.

(Re) Discovering Tikkun Olam: Writing as Ethical Vocation

In discussing the merits of writing to heal I analyzed statements made by Barbara Jago and Carol Rambo showing the personal pain and potential dangers in the material they wrote about. Commenting on the purpose behind continuing to write I quoted Jago in claiming she was demystifying and demythologizing depression and that in itself was purposeful. While I do believe there are potential dangers to the self in using narrative writing or autoethnography, as opposed to private writing such as journaling, I argue that the cathartic nature of the writing comes from the ethical vocation to write. The courageousness of authors such as Adams, Bochner, Ellis, Jago, Kiesinger, Tillman-Healy,

Rambo, to share deep personal, painful experiences, in the end may help them in making meaning, but in many ways more importantly they help others who share similar experiences.

The examples I am offering above come from authors writing about their experiences with personal loss, depression, eating disorders, framing identity, rape, and wrestling with the potential ethical dangers of continuing to write on these subjects. Here I want to explore why survivors of genocide write. In doing so, in their words, they will reinforce the argument I am making, the very act of writing is based on an ethical calling. That calling, or vocation, is to change the world, but even if one is not able to affect change in the world, at the very least they write to not to be changed by the world. In what follows I will start with survivors of the Rwandan genocide and then discuss survivors of the Holocaust. Finally, I will discuss their impact on my spirituality and my nepantla or borderland identity. Let me begin with those writing about the Rwandan genocide.

Marie Béatrice Umutesi's account of the Rwandan genocide was unique in that it was told from the perspective of a Hutu. Commonly narratives of the genocide are told by the Tutsis because the Hutus were the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide. Yet, the truth is victims of the genocide were both Tutsis and Hutus once the violence had broken out and in the aftermath of the genocide. Umutesi's account speaks to the experiences of the Hutu refugees in the Displaced Persons camps and fleeing from them, following the Rwandan genocide. The common perception (offered here in a statement made to Umutesi by her hairdresser) was that because the Hutus were the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide, "…it is the Hutus' turn to suffer…" (Umutesi, 2000, p. 32). Umutesi claims, "Every morning

several thousand starving, half naked women and children descended on Kigali. They came to beg something that would allow them to live one more day. When a woman or child held out an emaciated hand…they got insults or spit in the face" (Umutesi, 2000, p. 31). Umutesi offers three reasons for writing her book. The first reason, as discussed in Aliko Songolo's article, beginning with a quote by Umutesi reflects much of the above literature:

> 'I made a habit of writing so that people would know and break their silence, but also to stop my own pain…I often wept while I wrote, but when I finished, I felt comforted' (78). Writing had a therapeutic function; it healed and made it possible for Umutesi to continue despite the enormity of her predicament…She hoped that it [the writing] would be discovered and read and would motivate readers to break their silence. (Songolo, 2005, p. 109)

Umutesi's additional motivation for writing was a memorial for those who had died. Similar to other survivors of genocide, she wanted to ensure that the memory of the people would live on. "…writing was an act of personal defiance against death, but it also served to give voice to a collective defiance against those who would seek to erase the memory of the Hutu victims" (Songolo, 2005, p. 109). And finally, according to Songolo, Umutesi had an unstated reason for writing, also one of defiance. In this case it was defiance against the international community that was able to turn away from the Hutu refugees treating them monolithically as members of the rebels. "…the international community felt that it was enough to recognize one evil [the perpetration of the genocide by the Hutu majority] and that it could afford to turn a blind eye to the other [the massacre of Hutus in refugee camps]" (Songolo, 2005, p. 110). Examination of Umutesi's purposes in writing support the earlier premise that writing provides, as Ryden claims, purgation. But the therapeutic

nature of Umutesi's writing seems to be rooted in its very defiance. Rather than "private" writing meant as a method to heal, for her the healing comes by nature of the ethical calling to ensure that the world is aware of the massacre of Hutus in the refugee camps and in hiding after the Rwandan genocide, and that it will encourage others to write. These reasons seem to mirror statements made by Elie Wiesel that he began writing to change the world, but continued writing so as not to be changed by the world. Umutesi refused to allow the silence of the international community to silence her.

Jewish Holocaust survivors often claim they tell their stories, or write their testimony, for reasons similar to those offered by Umutesi above. First, they write in memory of all those who were tragically lost in the Shoah. Telling the stories of the survivors' experiences incorporates the victims they knew that were killed, as well as chronicling the deaths of countless others. The second reason Jewish Holocaust survivors state they tell their stories is so the world will never forget and in doing so will work toward a better future. One example from Alicia Appleman-Jurman states she hopes the book will, "…teach young people what enormous reserves of strength they possess within themselves. I pray that all its readers, Jew and non-Jew alike, may unite in the resolve that evil forces will never again be permitted to set one people against another" (Appleman-Jurman, 1988, p. 433).

Oral history interviews, testimony, and memoirs are all painful experiences for Holocaust survivors, as detailed in many scholarly articles discussing the undertaking. Yet, the end result, according to the survivors makes the telling worthwhile. Boris Kacel, in discussing the memories and the writing of his memoir claims, "…I had to face the pain associated with them and relive the darkest days of my life. The process was torturously

long, as the details had to be retrieved and sorted out, one episode at a time" (Kacel, 1998, p. x). He goes on to claim:

> I hope this book will not only serve as a memorial to those who perished but will also shed light on the dark, forgotten corners of history…Only by learning from mistakes of the past can we prevent another mass genocide such as the Holocaust….It is my fervent desire that sharing my experiences and thoughts will help in some small way and that it will be unnecessary for books such as this one to ever again have to be written in a civilized society. (Kacel, 1998, p. x-xi)

I quote Kacel at length because his statement comprises the message of so many Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. That their messages be heard as a memorial, but not only a memorial, words to remind the world of the horrors of the past so that we can say Never Again. In this way survivors are participating in Tikkun Olam. "I am merely one voice, but I wish for it to be heard so that I may contribute, even in a small measure, to *tikun olam*, the mending of the world" (emphasis in original) (Baruch Goldstein, 2008, p. x).

Elie Wiesel, along with Arthur Cohen, both avoided writing on the Holocaust for a period of time. Both men expressed the feeling that there was no language sufficient to write about an event such as the Holocaust. Cohen claims he avoided writing about the Holocaust for nearly a generation. "I could not speak of Auschwitz, for I had no language that tolerated the immensity of the wound" (Cohen, 1981, p. 38). Wiesel claimed that he knew the obligation of a survivor was to testify but he did not know how.

> So heavy was my anguish that I made a vow: not to speak, not to touch upon the essentials for at least ten years. Long enough to see clearly. Long enough to learn to

> listen to the voices crying inside my own. Long enough to regain possession of my memory. Long enough to unite the language of man with the silence of the dead. (Wiesel, 18)

Similar to Wiesel, Greenberg was living with the voices of the dead and arguing that any statement made must be credible under the shadow of the dead. Greenberg states, "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children" (1974). Similar sentiments have been made by Wiesel about the Jewish children haunting his dreams. He likens them to his own adolescence in saying, "…image of a Jewish adolescent who knew no fear except the fear of God, whose faith was whole, comforting" (Wiesel, 1990, From the Kingdom of Memory, p. 18). Wiesel began writing after an interview with François Mauriac. Mauriac encouraged Wiesel by saying, "I think that you are wrong. You are wrong not to speak…Listen to the old man that I am: one must speak out – one must *also* speak out" (emphasis in original) (Wiesel, 1979, p. 23).

While both Cohen and Wiesel waited before writing, both also felt compelled to write about the Holocaust eventually. Wiesel (1990) asks, "Why do I write? Perhaps in order not to go mad. Or, on the contrary, to touch the bottom of madness" (p. 13). He has made clear again and again that while language betrays the experience of the Holocaust survivor he has no choice but to continue trying to make the world understand. Even in his acknowledgment (echoing the survivor I spoke with), "Whoever has not lived through the event can never know it. And whoever has lived through it can never fully reveal it" (1978, p. 234), he continues to write. His obligation is driven by the ultimate fear of forgetting, "The fear of forgetting: the main obsession of all those who have passed through the

universe of the damned. The enemy relied on people's disbelief and forgetfulness" (Wiesel, 1990, p. 15).

Wiesel's purpose in writing has been ultimately one of action. To not write is to be comfortable with silence, the silence of God and the silence of forgetting. Wiesel is not comfortable with silence. Heidi Anne Walker (1980) from her interview with Wiesel says, "…for him writing is very much an action, a deed that serves as a meaningful response to the past" (p. 57). Walker asks Wiesel if he finds writing pleasurable, and his response is worth quoting at length:

> Of course. I love to write. It's a pleasure and an agony. A pleasurable agony. An agonizing pleasure, whatever. I feel chosen; it's a chosen obsession. I could choose *not* to write. If I had the feeling that whatever I'm writing could be written by someone else, I wouldn't write it. I would read and study. I prefer that; it's easier. Literature is expiation and that's why writing is suffering. The happy don't write. As Kafka said, writing is a form of prayer. A man must have faith in something indestructible within himself; he cannot live, or write, without it…I would say to young writers that if you can do without it, don't do it. But if you cannot, then do it. But whether I give the advice or not, they would do it anyway! They must be so compulsive. (emphasis in original) (Walker, 1980, p. 61)

Wiesel's drive to write comes from a place of ethical vocation. It is clear throughout his many writings that his goal is not therapeutic rather the cathartic nature of the writing is that he is honoring the memory of those who were killed, he is demanding Never Again, and in defiance he stands against any posthumous victory by Hitler. Lauren Barlow (2009) analyzes Elie Wiesel's *Souls of Fire* alongside Derrida's "Edmond Jabés and The Question of

the Book." She claims, "…in the absence of God and all that He symbolizes, writing can be a form of prayer that can begin to redeem both man and God" (p. 41). For Wiesel writing is a form of prayer. Barlow (2009) states, "Writing need not be a relic that is a stagnant attempt to represent a fragmented reality, for each scribble on the blank page is a word to fill God's silence and strive for man's redemption" (p. 45). Wiesel began writing and has continued to write despite not being healed by the process. Instead his ethical calling has been to write in order to help heal the world, Tikkun Olam.

Studying genocide, coupled with my own escalating crises, created theological despair leading to a spiritual death allowing for the beginnings of a transformative rebirth. Rather than continuing to search for a religion that would provide comfort I turned back to the concept of Tikkun Olam and that drives my search for meaning. My experiential world of Santería, and the religious worldviews of Rubenstein, Cohen, Greenberg, Fackenheim, and Wiesel's Judaism helped to create my borderland identity. My disintegration and nepantlera identity has reinforced the "fire in my belly" to ensure I communicate to the students I teach the importance of acceptance of one another, the horrible treatment of humans by one another and the real possibility of genocide. I try to teach Tikkun Olam. Every Day.

I am nepantlera, I am a borderdweller. I am not a Christian. I am not a Jew. I am not Santerian. Instead, using Anzaldúa's model, "I'm trying to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut. I am trying to make peace between what has happened to me, what the world is, and what it should be" (La Prieta, 208). After five years of searching I have come to embrace what Darrell Fasching calls alienated theology. He claims, "To be an *alien* is to be a stranger. To be *alienated* is to be a stranger to oneself" (emphasis in

original) (Fasching, 6). I found myself at a precipice where the only way to move forward was to, in the words of the Buddhist master Hakuin, "Let Go." A stranger to myself, one who is not Christian, not Jewish, not Santerían, I no longer have a religious identity I claim. But in the lack of answers I returned to the teachings of one of my mentors, words that he learned from Paul Tillich. "…the questions are indeed more important [than the answers]," (Fasching, 7). Fasching goes on to claim, "Alienated theology understands doubt and the questions that arise from it as our most fundamental experience of the infinite. For, our unending questions keep us open to the infinite, continually inviting us to transcend our present horizon of understanding" (Fasching, 7). Instead of continuously being disappointed in God for "not" responding to the questions, I have re-framed my understanding to one that embraces not having the answers and in the divine having questions reflected back onto humankind. Rather than seeing God's lack of answer as indifference I now frame it as God's way of forcing humanity to "…keep open to the infinite, continually inviting us to transcend our present horizon of understanding" (Fasching, 1993, p. 7). Openness to the questions keeps us continually open to the lives of the other, allowing us to share in their experience without appropriating it as our own.

Throughout this project I have returned to the concept of Tikkun Olam. Let me take a moment to offer this quote from Hartman and Zimberoff of this Hasidic myth which has its origin in the Kabbalistic mysticism of Judaism.

> The ancient Hebrew concept of *tikkun* applies. According to the cosmological myth, 'The Shattering of the Vessels,' God sent forth vessels bearing a primordial light at the beginning of time. Had the vessels arrived intact, the world would have remained in its prelapsarian condition, i.e., as it was before the Fall. But somehow –

> no one knows why – the vessels shattered and scattered their sparks throughout the world…The second phase is called the 'Gathering the Sparks.' Here the object is to collect the fallen sparks and raise them up. This is the very definition of the process of *tikkun*, of healing a world that has become unraveled….Ultimately, when enough sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored. At the same time this process of transformation occurs within the individual as well. The myth is a healing one, focused on the processes of breaking apart and restoring to wholeness. (Hartman and Zimberoff, 2006, 21)

This myth is a variation of the shamanistic experience of restoring the shamans dismembered body, yet in the above myth of tikkun it is a collective narrative of the restoration of a whole community of persons, as described in Chapter Two in relation to the story of Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones. To describe the link between the personal and the collective experience of tikkun Hartman and Zimberoff (2006) claim:

> …the shattering of the vessels might be identified in individual terms as the equivalent of a breakdown. It represents a breaking through of the unconscious at a time of psychic transition. On the collective level, the shattering of the vessels represents a time of upheaval. The gathering of the sparks represents the process of restoration both on the individual and collective levels... (Hartman and Zimberoff, 2006, 21)

I quote this at length because this phraseology is so common from survivors of the Holocaust. Tikkun Olam. To repair the world. As Hartman and Zimberoff state it is a "myth of healing" and repairing the world is to restore it to wholeness. It just depends on how one

sees the world as whole. It's a powerful sentiment and one that drives nearly everything I do.

I have come to realize my goal is not to heal myself. I will never be healed. The goal is not to end suffering. There will always be suffering. I have learned that my hope lies in my integrity. Like Wiesel I must write and communicate about the suffering and despair of myself and others so I am not changed by the world, and while doing that to not fall victim to despair. And, if I am lucky, I will be able to pick up one of the shards and help repair the world.

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Watching my four year old son trace the letters etched into my left forearm I reflect. For months I couldn't even look at the fresh tattoo without getting violently nauseous. I would have to remind myself, "Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth." I covered the wounds on my arm, as I did the ones on my soul, so I wouldn't have to explain myself to others.

One of the most difficult parts of coming to terms with the ink permanently marking my identity is wrestling with how the Holocaust survivors I have built relationships with, as well as others, will take what I have done. In my desperate need to mark myself, to speak to the suffering of humankind, to release the pain that boils over, never once have I lost sight of the problematic nature of tattooing to Judaism, and most importantly to my survivors.

Not only does the religion of Judaism reject marking the body, tattooing is also associated with the Nazi regime assigning numbers to prisoners. For the most part the numbers were tattooed on the outside of the left forearm. But according to the United

States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2012) there were a series of prison transports in 1943 that had the tattoos placed on the upper part of their inner forearm ("Tattoos and Numbers", 4th para.). How do I explain my choices to someone who had their skin indelibly marked with a number signifying their entrance to a camp in which they may have lost their family, friends, community? Can I explain it was my way of sharing in their pain, of expressing the sorrow that I have empathically come to identify with?

The Jewish Holocaust survivor that told me I would never fully understand was right. I will never fully understand what it feels like to be Jewish and live with the history of the Holocaust. But because of what I have learned, and internalized, I have dedicated my life to the plight arising from human tragedy, a plight that rose out of some human's ability to dehumanize, demonize, and kill other humans. Out of the depths of my own theological despair I was, and continue to be, reborn to try to guide others. To do what my survivors have taught me as our continued purpose is in the world.

I watch my son who asks yet again, "What does it say mommy?"

"Tikkun Olam," I respond.

"Tikkun Olam," he says back.

"Heal the world," I say.

"Heal the world," he repeats, although world comes out woyld.

"That's right baby," I say, brushing his hair back out of his face and kissing his forehead.

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APPENDIX
MAP OF JEWISH RESPONSES TO THE HOLOCAUST

The Extremes

1. Rejection of Religion of Judaism

(Secular Israeli Jews)

5. Continuing Judaism as it was before the Holocaust
(Ultra Orthodox)

Between the Extremes

2. God's Absence
Judaism going on without God

Rubenstein
God died at Auschwitz
We keep rituals without beliefs

3. God's Ambiguity
Judaism as wrestling with God

Wiesel
God failed us. We continue to practice but we put God on "trial"

Greenberg
Momentary Faith --
we alternate between moments of hope and moments of despair

Cohen
Tremendum we must excavate the abyss of the Holocaust to secure the our human future

4.God's Presence
Judaism Responding to God's Presence -- His commanding voice speaking from Auschwitz

Fackenheim
Remembering and keeping the faith after Auschwitz in defiance of Hitler