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## Lives on the (story)Line: Group Facilitation with Men in Recovery at The Salvation Army

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Lives on the (story)Line:  
Group Facilitation with Men in Recovery at The Salvation Army

by

Lisa Pia Zonni Spinazola

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this project first to my children who through their mere existence give me a *why* to live, and second to my participants and other men at The Salvation Army who grapple with finding a *how* to live (Frankl, 1984).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this dissertation, I seek to examine the effects of purposeful journaling and guided storytelling on past traumas, perception of current lives, and the development of new coping skills among men at The Salvation Army's residential adult rehabilitation center (ARC). All residents of the ARC must attend Christian-based devotional services, go to Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) meetings, follow the A.A. 12-step program, and sign up for several weekly counseling and educational groups, one of which is the "Guided Journaling and Storytelling" group I lead. The men who attended this group are (1) addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, (2) face homelessness, (3) cope with some form of mental or physical health issue, (4) may have criminal records, and (5) have alienated most of their social support.

Through a twelve-week curriculum I developed, I introduced coping skills—building resilience, expressive writing, and deep breathing—while incorporating art, music, and poetry in the groups. I elicited participants' stories through prompts, using my own experiences to model vulnerability and demonstrate concepts, such as: narrative reframing; how memories can be uncertain, partial, and elusive; how storytelling can prompt forgotten stories; and the efficacy of including emotion and rich details in the stories we tell. Knowing the value of writing and storytelling, I set out to see if the communicative practices I had learned in the past that had improved my life situation might assist others to write themselves out of destructive patterns, desperation, and trauma, and into sober and more fulfilling lives.

## PREFACE

In this dissertation, I seek to examine the effects of purposeful journaling and guided storytelling on past traumas, perception of current lives, and the development of new coping skills among men at The Salvation Army's residential adult rehabilitation center (ARC). I invite readers into the experience of groups I facilitated with these men who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, face homelessness, cope with some form of mental or physical health issue, may have criminal records, and have alienated most of their social support.

I introduce eight composite characters who attend seven exemplary group sessions composed from a combination of actual meetings. Using participants' spoken words, I demonstrate compassionate group facilitation techniques as I engage and guide the participants through various topics and prompts about regret, forgiveness, and hope. As group facilitator, I bear witness to devastating and tragic childhood stories, feel the toll addiction takes on those struggling to quit using drugs and alcohol as well as on their friends and family, and experience awe and amazement as I listen to the participants' stories of resilience and determination.

Before moving to the story of my dissertation, I present tales about my own winding, adventurous journey from childhood into adulthood, and through to this moment. I feel these events—personal, academic, and work related—are important to tell since they have led me to the work I am doing now with these groups. To show what I mean, I tell *My Story*—how I wrote and used poetry to cope with childhood abuse and abandonment and how I spiraled out of control as a young adult until finally getting my priorities in order. I detail how I entered community

college ten years ago and powered through two associate's degrees, a bachelor's degree with a minor, a master's degree, and into my doctoral program.

I discuss how I became interested in this particular population (addicted males), how I acquired access to my research site, and my prior experience facilitating other types of groups. I reveal my process and rationale for creating my curriculum, how I decided which prompts to use, where I learned about some of the methods I include, and why and how I incorporate strategies that are new to “group work” but come from my experience in the discipline of Communication.

Next, in *Setting the Stage and Reviewing the Literature*, I introduce The Salvation Army story and the men (Beneficiaries of The Salvation Army) with whom I've spent the past three years working, learning from, and getting to know. I dig into the topics that arise through their interactions with me and each other and through conversations generated by the weekly prompts. I review literature relevant to this population—their experiences with trauma, addiction, masculinity, and emotions. I explore the inner workings of the groups themselves—the role of storytelling, narrative reframing, collaborative witnessing, and compassionate interviewing in facilitating groups. I save additional information on how I did this work for the end by moving additional methods, methodology, and ethics to the Appendix allowing readers to dive into the story more quickly.

*Welcome to Group* introduces the story of group, showing what occurs during the first meeting with those who volunteered to participate in this project. The heart of my project, entitled *The Story of Group*, takes the reader into the room with me to observe group work in action: how early tensions arise and resolve, how trust is built and maintained, and how participants interact with me and each other. In the *Conclusion*, I bring the reader back into the room with me as I meet three participants for a follow-up meeting. We explore the main ideas

generated from our work together, discuss how the men and their lives are impacted since participating, what worked and perhaps why, new insights regarding why I became involved with this particular population, and possible future direction for my work. I also explore how facilitating groups and working with these men impacts my life and understandings of who I am, the world I move through, and my relationships.

## MY STORY

### The Beginning

My childhood and early teen years were rife with abuse, abandonment, and neglect. Books were imaginary worlds within my reach into which I could retreat and feel safe. I read voraciously, repeatedly escaping into C. S. Lewis's magical tales of lions, witches, and wardrobes; venturing out to solve mysteries beside Keene's Nancy Drew; and learning about so-called *normal* teen life through Blume's characters. Every spare moment was spent somewhere, anywhere, hidden away from prying eyes, and curled up with a story.

At thirteen, I discovered writing. I wrote poetry, songs, and short stories in loose leaf binders. I scribbled ideas for future books on scraps of paper and napkins. I wrote about my life as it was and how I wished it could be. I wrote about feeling lonely, misunderstood, abandoned, and my rare times of delight. Reading books may have helped me escape my life, but writing gave me new life. I didn't know why or how writing helped, only that it did.

I wrote:

Constant  
Oppressive  
Needy  
Tenacious  
Restrictive  
Obscene  
Lonesome

Aimlessly I drifted, thrusting, spinning, twisted, toward some unknown.  
Searching, reaching, grasping, blindly, hopeful, blistered, yearning for a home.  
Like planets all aligned, my family, out of reach and mind.

When you look in a mirror,  
What do you see?  
Are you merely an image  
Of who you should be?  
Are you trapped, locked in?  
Who holds the key?  
How do you feel  
When you look at me?

My first ten years of life were spent in the Bahamas, the next two in Costa Rica, until my family moved to Englewood, Florida to stay with my maternal grandmother. A year later we moved to Tampa, Florida, which to this day I consider “home base.” When I was fifteen, my parents divorced and sent me and my younger sisters to live with relatives in Toronto, Canada. After graduating high school, I moved back to Tampa for a few months before falling in love with a man and following him to Los Angeles, California. I married him, had a baby, left him, and returned to Tampa.

I wrote:

There’s no sparkle or fireworks, the magic is gone.  
There’s no tenderness or passion, something’s very wrong.  
The nights are dark and lonely, and the days seem so long.  
Now the tears outweigh the smiles, just like all the sad songs.

A few years later, I moved to Atlanta (yes, again for a man), was dumped, met another man, had another baby, left him and moved back to Tampa, a five-year-old son and six-month-old daughter in tow.

I wrote:

Patterns imbedded,  
My needle threaded,  
Ready to go the same route,  
Blinders on,  
Same old song,  
Oblivious to my own doubts.

And wrote:

Once more, she took a foolish chance,  
Blind love, based upon a dance,  
Easy to trust his light-hearted smile,  
Heart torn again, that was her style.

And wrote my way into some understanding:

I awoke to fuzzy thoughts, distortion and fear.  
Disconnected from reality, I was ripped back into the “now”.  
My high, long gone, along with you,  
Awash in the knowledge, I am the loser, the junkie, the fiend.  
Again, I will suffer the consequences of my fix, my dependence, my obsession.  
Here I sit in an, oh, so, familiar scene, with no one to call.  
I have worn out my welcome and called in my favors with those who cared.  
Desperation clings and terror builds.  
My sensibility deprivation got the best of me again.  
Intense longing for affection is my affliction, my disease.  
And, at every cost to me, so is my desperate need to please.

My life was a mess. I had no career and no education, and two babies were counting on me to provide for them. Peppered with evictions and repossessions, my credit was destroyed and my self-esteem was nonexistent. The plus? I finally recognized why I was making the same choices over and over. I was spinning out of control in a wild search for love, affection, and acceptance. I was thirty years old when I realized whatever it was I was searching for had to take a back seat to finding a way to care for my kids. I went to counseling, attended parenting classes, and found a full-time job with benefits.

I spent years clawing my way out of the hole I had dug for myself. Step by step, little by little, I created a life for me and my kids. From a five dollar an hour job, to eight dollars an hour, to fifteen, then twenty-five. Ten years later, I was able to afford a new car, purchase a home, and feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. I could breathe. Was life perfect? No. But, I found a niche. I worked as a general manager and human resource manager for a local, high end, multimillion dollar company. Responsible for over thirty employees, I found ways to make sure



they all felt heard. I facilitated difficult conversations, helped resolve disputes, clarified expectations, and counseled coworkers in matters of the heart as well as the workplace.

All my life, strangers had no problem sharing their stories of pain, conflict, and deep dark secrets with me in grocery store aisles, pharmacy waiting areas, and nightclub bathrooms. Friends always sought my guidance; and now colleagues were thanking me for my intuition and insight, telling me I was a natural counselor, and complimenting my compassion and empathy. It was in that moment I recognized I could make a difference in people's lives. I felt invigorated by helping. I decided I wanted more for myself; a degree. So at the age of forty-two, I enrolled in my local community college and began the journey toward becoming an actual counselor.

### **Going Back To School**

I enrolled in a program called Counseling and Human Services featuring classes such as Behavior Modification, Issues of Aging, Abnormal Behavior, Crisis Intervention, Interpersonal Skills, and Working with Families. Any worries I had about being a non-traditional student dissolved. I was in heaven. I soaked up every statistic, fact, and experience about which I read. Everything I read felt like common sense knowledge; it reverberated within me, was already part of me, and reinforced the confidence and self-esteem I had been creating and building over the past ten years. The classes I took provided a filing system of sorts to help me organize and make sense of the life experiences I had been collecting to date. I was able to see the role my upbringing played in who I had been and what I needed to work on to become not only the best mother I could be but the best version of myself I could become.

While I had experienced one-on-one counseling, I had never been a member of a structured therapeutic group of any sort before taking the class called Group Process. I could not

imagine buying into a method or theory where everything was on display for others to see, hear, and evaluate. I felt counseling was a private matter, something to be worked on and through between a patient and counselor, not fodder for a wider audience. Over the course of a semester, my opinion changed drastically.

According to Corey, Corey, and Corey (2010), group therapy is the treatment of choice for problems like complicated grief, trauma, adjustment problems, and existential concerns. It is a go-to treatment for numerous intrapersonal and interpersonal issues and is beneficial for those interested in changing and growing. In this class, I learned how group counseling can provide education as well as prompt personal change. Designed to be brief and cost-effective, group sessions focus on symptomatic relief, teaching participants problem-solving strategies and how to improve interpersonal skills. They provide a sense of community in which trust is built and cohesion develops, creating forces that bring about healing (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010).

At first I was reading the class assignments to understand as though I was a client, imagining how I would feel participating in group sessions. But then I repositioned myself as a student who was learning to run groups, and I started to look at group work differently. I learned much from Corey, Corey, and Corey's (2010) textbook. Addressing the characteristics of a good group leader, the authors note that qualities and strategies, such as active listening, reflecting, summarizing, empathizing, interpreting, supporting, confronting, and modeling, are vital to the group process. The text explores the question of whether or not to include a co-leader, citing the pluses and minuses. The authors discuss practical considerations of forming a group, such as group composition, number of participants, how often to meet, how long the meetings run, where to meet, and whether the membership should shift and change or the same members should participate for a specific number of weeks before enrolling a new group.

While I could now see the value of group work in comparison to one-on-one counseling, the responsibility of being a group facilitator seemed overwhelming. What if I messed up by not picking the right mix of members, being unprepared, not knowing what to say and when to say it? Or what if I was challenged by one of the members? How might I handle myself? How could I benefit others when I felt terrified? I realized I was getting ahead of myself and dug in, making the most of all I was learning. I had years to go after all, tons of time to learn and grow into a therapist who would be confident when it came time to do counseling.

Once I completed my coursework, I began interning in the field. Before graduating with our associate's degree, we were required to complete 600 hours at three different placements. I first interned at ACTS Thonotosassa, a six-month residential facility for addicted teens who were in trouble with the law; then at Operation PAR, a sixteen-month lockdown facility for men who were addicted and facing prison sentences; and finally at Suncoast Kids' Place, where children who had experienced the death of a loved one were able to process their grief with peers. A common theme emerged from my internship experiences—early childhood losses, traumas, and abuses are often associated with use and misuse of drugs and/or alcohol which in turn can lead to criminal records resulting from various crimes committed while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. Thus, I early on became interested in issues of addiction.

I found hope in my third practicum experience. Peer support groups seemed to be one way to help soften the impact of the violence, loss, and trauma kids might experience. At this final placement, I watched children as young as three years of age tell their stories of loss and trauma by playing dress-up, coloring, and puppet shows. All grade levels, kindergarten through high school, were represented in this placement, and the ways each group processed and shared varied. Facilitators read story books, encouraged storytelling during circle time, and used music

and popular culture to connect and stay relevant to each age range. Structured, age-appropriate peer support in the early stages of grief appeared to be an effective intervention.

### **Can't Get Enough of School**

I graduated with my Associate of Science in Counseling and Human Services and planned to begin a Bachelor of Social Work degree at the University of South Florida. Before applying though, I stumbled upon the Department of Communication and was attracted to classes such as Family Communication, Communicating Grief and Loss, Interpersonal Communication, Personal Storytelling, Writing Lives, and Persuasion. I formulated a new plan. First, I'd get a Bachelor's degree in Communication and then pursue an M.A. in social work. I figured learning more about communication could only enhance my ability to become an excellent counselor or mental health therapist.

While taking "Communicating Emotions" with Dr. Carolyn Ellis and "Love and Communication" with Dr. Arthur Bochner, not only did I learn and grow, but I was witness to transformative change in almost every classmate. Using impromptu activities, writing assignments, oral storytelling, in-class movies, and relevant articles, we explored topics such as love, loss, neglect, abandonment, grief, death, and the range of emotions experienced throughout our lives. Consequently, I recognized why and understood more about how my early writing experiences saved me.

I learned that the key to healing through writing is to deeply feel, explore, and express our feelings about moments in our past as we link the past and the present (DeSalvo, 1999). Through stories we invent and reinvent ourselves, make past experiences present, and have the

chance to save ourselves (O'Brien, 2009). I somehow had accidentally stumbled on a way to survive my childhood and tolerate adulthood by writing my way through.

Noticing the joy, passion, care, and connection exuding from both these professors as they taught subjects in which they were clearly invested opened the door for me to reconsider my next steps. I left those classes a different person with new understanding of myself and my place in the world and a deeper understanding of others and their cultural worlds. My classmates in those courses agreed; they felt different and saw the world with new eyes. When it was time to apply to the social work graduate program, I found myself pulled in a different direction. I wasn't done learning all that the Communication Program had to teach me.

### **Switching Course (Or The Road Not Travelled)**

I instead applied and was accepted into the Master's program in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. To stay connected to the social services and support field, I took a part-time job as a grief group facilitator for adolescent males incarcerated for crimes related to their addictions. This opportunity was made possible because of my successful work interning at Suncoast Kids' Place a few years earlier.

The prison grief groups give incarcerated adolescents an opportunity to share stories of grief and loss with us facilitators and each other. Some of these stories had never been told aloud or shared with anyone. Most participants had suffered heinous situations: drive-by shootings, parents murdered before their eyes, and finding loved ones dead. While incarcerated, they suffered additional losses, which were magnified by prolonged absences from their lives on the outside and the disconnection from the loved ones who were still around. During group, participants were responsive, many of them connecting with others from whom they once shied

away, praying for each other as each member opened up, helping us set up and breakdown supplies, and showing gratitude and growth.

In the process, a concern cropped up for me. Labeling a group “grief and loss” limited the stories group members felt free to share. While they disclosed stories of various types of trauma, they told them as side stories to the grief and loss narratives we prompted them to tell. Any stories focusing solely on abuse, neglect, abandonment, or witnessing violence seemed to have no place in our sessions. Also, I was discouraged that participants were not permitted to keep printed materials and worksheets they completed in group. I felt they could have benefitted from having continued access to all the information provided and to the work they did through their participation. But I did not have the authority to make changes to the groups I was facilitating.

Instead, I imagined creating a new group, one that could work in conjunction with or in the place of those groups in the future—one that might take into account the knowledge and connections forming because of my internships. The curriculum I envisioned would not be based in psychology or counseling per se and would not be focused solely on grief, but would instead use concepts and ideas I learned while taking classes in the Department of Communication: emotions, relationships, trauma and grief, storytelling, writing to heal, and pedagogy. I conceptualized a workbook that would be maintained by each participant during group and that could be used not only as a reminder about where they had been, but later as reference material and a guide for how to get where they might want to go in the future.

Knowing the healing power of writing through trauma from the effect of my own poetry writing and journaling since the age of thirteen, I imagined incorporating journaling and writing into whatever group I might create. The recorded mementos I have collected show how my life has unfolded and all I have overcome. Having access to these written memories of who I once

was and who I am now shows the work of becoming, makes the changes tangible, and reminds me that I am constantly being constituted and reconstituted. I think reminders like this are instrumental to not feeling stuck in old stories of trauma, loss, shame, guilt, and regret.

I imagined a curriculum that stressed the benefits of narrative framing and reframing, of becoming, of telling old stories through new filters, in the hopes that it would be possible for participants to watch this process unfold for themselves and others through participation in a guided journaling and storytelling group. But my vision had to wait, and my plans and dreams of creating a new kind of group were relegated to doodles and ideas scratched onto scraps of paper and in the margins of class notes. I continued to run the groups as required, focusing on what was working, what went well, and benefits the members gained through participation.

While earning my Master's degree, I decided to apply to the Communication Ph.D. program and remain at USF. Knowing this meant researching and writing a dissertation, I opted to take comprehensive exams instead of doing research and writing a Master's thesis. I had the opportunity to begin writing my ideal curriculum for one of my M.A. comprehensive examination questions. The other comprehensive questions I was asked focused on group facilitation methods and ethics, as well as storytelling and writing for healing.

### **Putting It All Together For a Doctoral Research Project**

I passed my M.A. comprehensive exams and was accepted into the Communication Ph.D. program at the University of South Florida. Excitement pulsed through my whole being when I realized that everything I had done, learned, and worked toward was about to culminate in a final project in which I could complete the curriculum I envisioned creating and do research onsite with groups I designed.

Earlier, I expressed two concerns I had when I ran grief groups with incarcerated adolescents under the guidance of Suncoast Kids' Place: how naming the group impacts the way stories are told and the failure to provide participants with tangible copies and mementos of the efforts they made. I focused on these two issues while I sought to research further and incorporate the many practices and activities that had worked well in previous groups which I had facilitated. Several examples come to mind immediately: checking in, informative handouts, collaborative activities, and checking out.

Check-in: before diving into the heart of the meetings in my previous work with incarcerated adolescents, we would ask participants to say on a scale of one to ten how they were feeling and why. For most, it was an opportunity to express irritations, conflict, and despair about their current situation and did not have to focus on grief or loss. I remember my surprise when participants found reasons to say why they might "feel like a ten." Reasons included having legal charges reduced, a visit from a parent who lived out of town, a call from an estranged relative, or earning privileges for having followed the rules. Checking in with participants as we began each session was an essential warm-up before digging in to the day's agenda (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010). Thus, I wanted to make sure I incorporated a check-in for any guided journaling and storytelling group I ran though I was not initially sure of how that would go.

Informative handouts: after check-in, we would hand out information and talk about a topic or subject that would set up the members to participate in the activity we prepared for the day. What kinds of activities might work for a broader themed group? I wanted future participants to have an opportunity to talk about grief and loss but I knew I had to build in the



freedom to address topics like trauma, neglect, abandonment, tragedy, as well as delight, joy, and accomplishment.

Collaborative activities: there were preplanned activities for each meeting with the kids, most of them involving some type of art connecting individual stories to each other and the topic at hand. It was the participants' choice to participate or not, and I knew I wanted to continue offering that freedom. My activities for the group I planned to run would center on art and writing, and I built in multiple ways of participating and engaging as I researched the kinds of art to incorporate.

Check-out: to wrap up our time together, we would light a candle, say a prayer, or pick and read affirmations. It was a time for participants to say what they had learned, to determine if they felt better or worse after having participated, and reach out to each other if they felt moved by another person's stories. Summarizing what has happened during group, integrating prior group happenings, and projecting out what the next week creates continuity for members (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010). Thus, I built in a check-out process, a chance for participants to say how they feel at the end of group (as well as when they first arrive), which gives me a way to evaluate the day's activities and interventions.

Other issues I considered: groups with incarcerated adolescents were often an hour long and had the same ten participants for the twelve week curriculum. An hour passed too quickly so I planned my new groups to run for an hour and a half so all participants could have ample time to talk. I decided to limit the membership to ten per group and encourage them to complete the full curriculum together allowing familiarity, open and honest conversation, and vulnerability to develop (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2010; Yalom, 2005).

Ideas for group structure and process took shape into a dissertation research project grounded in the value of writing and storytelling for healing. I had hoped to work with adolescent males who were in trouble with the law. These young men seem to be the least understood of all groups, have few resources, and are tasked with being strong and unaffected in spite of the horrors they have faced. Early intervention seems to be the key—before adulthood sets in, before arrests become permanent public records making it nearly impossible to get federal financial student aid or decent jobs. While adolescents in prison are the population I wanted to help, they are a doubly vulnerable and protected class. Running groups with them for research purposes is not an option. After solidifying the curriculum, I knew I needed to find an alternate population and research site.

Thus I arranged a meeting with Chris Nicely, director of The Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center (ARC), a place serving adult males who struggle with addiction. I met Chris eight years earlier when we were students together at Hillsborough Community College in the Counseling and Human Services program. I pitched my ideas for running a new kind of group rooted in the discipline of Communication. I told him that while the curriculum I had created was not therapy per se, it was grounded in group counseling literature and used communication theories to therapeutic ends.

I told him how journaling and storytelling might be combined, modeled, and practiced to help build resilience to overcome future obstacles; that telling stories to others who listen and give feedback can enhance written journaling and generates healing as well (Rosenthal, 2003). Chris was familiar with the benefits of regular journaling—quieting the mind while simultaneously engaging us, fostering resilience, getting us out of our heads, helping us learn about and accept ourselves, and giving order to chaos (DeSalvo, 1999). I told him that

incorporating a variety of journaling methods (storytelling, art, music, and poetry) gives broader access to the coping and healing journaling provides (Malchiodi, 2013). He was on board.

After making an official offer to let me facilitate groups with residents at the ARC, Chris told me the men I'd be working with ranged in ages from eighteen to mid-seventies, struggled with histories of abuse and neglect, had criminal records, spent time living homeless, and all were in treatment for addiction. We hammered out the final details of time, place, and number of members in the group.

## **SETTING THE STAGE AND REVIEWING THE LITERATURE**

As I honed the curriculum and worked with these men, I sought to understand as much as I could about them and the issues they faced. I researched the culture of the Salvation Army and the history of addiction. I read broadly about men with addiction, the relationship between addiction and trauma, and the role of masculinity and emotion. In addition, I extended my understanding of communicative and relational strategies of doing group work and how storytelling and journaling are used as intervention strategies for those struggling to make sense of their lives and the world. This literature and introduction to the project set the stage for the stories that follow, where I will again pick up, discuss, and demonstrate these ideas at work.

### **The Salvation Army and the Participants**

The Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center (ARC) located off Nebraska Avenue in Tampa, Florida accepts able-bodied males who are capable of performing physical labor. All are dealing with drug and alcohol addiction but are not admitted to the program unless they go through detox and test “clean.” Men can be referred to the facility, be court-ordered in lieu of or to reduce jail time, or sign up voluntarily. They agree to stay for six months and upon completion “graduate” from the program. Once admitted, the residents (referred to as *beneficiaries* by the facility) are housed in three-, four-, or five-man living quarters; are prohibited from storing any kind of food in their rooms; and are limited to a specific numbers of clothing and shoe items.

Beneficiaries are required to work 40-hours a week, attend Christian-based prayer and devotional services, go to Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) meetings, follow the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step (Appendix 5) program, find an outside A.A. sponsor, and sign up for several weekly counseling and educational groups. They are permitted to leave the facility during specific hours and upon their return are required to blow into breathalyzer machines and submit to random drug testing.

There are several levels that the men move through during their time at the Center and the level they attain determines specific responsibilities and earns them various privileges. For example, during the first thirty days, there are no overnight passes and no cell phone use. Violating a rule bumps the men back to beginner status for a week where privileges are severely limited. This bump backwards is referred to as getting a “pink tag.” Getting pink-tagged repeatedly is one reason to get expelled from the program, as is using drugs, drinking alcohol, stealing donated items, and repeated violations of other rules.

Benefits of being accepted into the program as a beneficiary include having a safe place to sleep, three meals a day, access to laundry facilities, a place to work out, job counseling, help restoring credit, mental health counseling, psychiatric treatment, medical and dental care, filled prescriptions, and opportunities for joining The Salvation Army as paid employees. While some beneficiaries complain about the stringent rules, most adhere to them, and if they relapse, do not hesitate to return and try again.

In the three and a half years I’ve been facilitating groups, I’ve met hundreds of the beneficiaries and had the privilege of getting to know eighty-two of them well through their membership in my groups. Most of the men who volunteered to participate were white and from working class backgrounds. Approximately eight participants were Black, five were Latino, one

was Asian, and one was from India. Five identified as gay but only three were open about their sexuality during group conversations.

Based on the stories men told during group, I met three doctors, two nurses, an architect, three firefighters, a few in high-end sales, and some who did temporary unskilled or skilled manual labor. Many never said what they did for work. I was surprised. No one was safe from the far-reaching grip of addiction; regardless of education, class, and occupation. All participants suffered some form of trauma in childhood: sexual abuse, rape, beatings, witnessing domestic violence, incarcerated parents, forced to use drugs and alcohol by relatives, locked up, tied up, death of parents, and/or hunger. Many continued to experience violence and trauma as they grew up, usually connected to their addiction: homelessness, attempts at suicide, repeated overdosing, friends dying from diseases related to addiction, serving jail and prison time, being victims of violent crimes, and family members severing ties.

The beneficiaries know the odds are stacked against them. Plagued with evictions, repossessions, DUI's, criminal records, poor health, broken families, and the stigma of being labeled "alcoholic" or "addict," they carry the heavy burdens of guilt, remorse, regret, and shame. But, somehow, all still have hope that their lives can improve by working the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, believing in Jesus, and taking advantage of classes and groups offered at The Salvation Army.

It is important to note that while I prompted the men to tell personal stories, their narratives are inextricably linked to cultural, institutional, and organizational narratives especially as men who are addicted, homeless, with criminal records, and currently living *and* working at The Salvation Army (Loseke, 2007). These larger, overarching cultural scripts and storylines either help or hinder how one is able to narratively make sense of the past and write

themselves into meaningful futures (Freeman, 2009). One example comes to mind immediately. Criminal records or a lack of a permanent address trap most in the narrative of being unemployable or unable to receive other services.

Another example of an overarching narrative impacting men in treatment at The Salvation Army is the label, *beneficiary*. I see it as a reminder to be grateful and to acknowledge their position is tenuous and hinges on their cooperation and adhering to the rules. Knowing they must attend Christian services impacts how they might modify personal narratives (sexuality, faith, or morality) to fit The Salvation Army story and remain in treatment. Knowing they must attend meetings at A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) and N.A. (Narcotics Anonymous), their stories are constrained within the A.A. and N.A. narratives. Members must admit to being powerless over their drug of choice and are required to begin stories with the line, “Hello, my name is so-and-so and I am an alcoholic/addict.” I witnessed instances where this made it more difficult to write themselves into stories where they could be empowered to move past the label of “addict.”

## **Men and Trauma**

Men who openly participated during group sessions told stories of trauma that preceded their alcohol and drug use. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAMHSA (2014), reports that individual trauma (pg. 7): results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and can have lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Feelings of trauma can result from direct involvement in an incident, having witnessed an event, or being threatened with harm;

trauma produces a sense of fear, helplessness, and vulnerability; and traumatic events are interpreted, responded to, and experienced differently by those who are simultaneously impacted.

How people interpret the experiences and express emotions about the trauma can affect them more than the trauma itself (Barlow, Turow, & Gerhart, 2017). Survivors and victims of childhood trauma experience a wide array of issues, including grief, depression, flashbacks, withdrawal, suicidal tendencies, hypersensitivity, substance abuse, and self-injury; and, homelessness, delinquency, criminal behavior, dropping out of school, and failure to maintain a job often stem from experiencing traumatic events (Evans-Chase, 2014; Dierkhising et al., 2013).

Strong connections can be made between the triggering potential of trauma on the development of addictions later in life (Bernstein, 2000; Cross & Ashley, 2007; Morgan, 2009). Victims of early childhood trauma are up to four times more likely to use and misuse drugs and alcohol (Morgan, 2009; Savage, Quiros, Dodd, & Bonavota, 2007). Based on stories participants told, traumatic events preceded drug and alcohol use and continue because of the men's addictions.

## **Men and Addiction**

The concept of addiction in the U.S. has shifted as a result of the times. Emerging alongside Western Enlightenment and the notions of rationality and autonomy, the idea of addiction arose out of the fear of their opposites—irrationality and dependence (Fraser, Moore, & Keane, 2014). Lower-class drunkenness rather than capitalism became the justification for urban squalor (Sournia, 1990). With this slant, the poor were held accountable for their living conditions and personal weakness (moral or physical) was to blame (Alt, 1991).



While most were quick to blame depravity for addiction and heavy drinking, inventions and advances in medical treatments led some to view habitual drunkenness as a sickness or a symptom of a deep mental disorder (Alt, 1991). Leshner (1997) was instrumental in reframing the more modern view of addiction as a chronic disorder or disease moving addicts out of the realm of immoral sinners and into the realm of patients in need of treatment.

Once heavy drinking and alcoholism were identified and defined as addictions, other drugs (opium) were framed as addictive leading to legal sanctions defining which drugs and what levels of use could be considered lawful and permissible (Fraser, 2016). Each new sanction shouldered the addict with additional stigmas: immorality, depravity, sickness, and criminality.

More recently it has been determined that vulnerability to develop addictions depends on genetic, physiological, and environmental conditions (Morozova, Mackay, & Anholt, 2014), circling us back to the role of trauma. Environmental factors related to living with caregivers who use drugs and alcohol also play a role in addiction and alcoholism (Ducci & Goldman, 2008; Edenberg & Foroud, 2006; Farris, Wolen, & Miles, 2010). These children are at increased risk of “negative psychosocial and developmental outcomes such as depression, anxiety, social isolation, conduct and behavioral problems, and lower academic achievement” (Usher, McShane, & Dwyer, 2015), leading to higher incidents of addiction later in life (Spataro, 2011).

To correct an addict’s failings, we have religious-based interventions, medical treatments, psychological therapies, and legal diversion programs centered on crimes committed as a result of drug and/or alcohol use and misuse. The Salvation Army is a place where all these dimensions are addressed and attended to as the men move through their time there.

## **Men and Masculinity**

Jellinek (1952) sorted alcoholics into two categories: non-addicted alcoholics and alcohol addicts for whom problems in “loss of control” was the determining factor of addiction. The paradox of drinking to relieve the problems of life in turn becoming the problem itself reminds me of something else I read. Men often drink alcohol as a display of masculinity (power) and paradoxically when men feel gender-role stress (powerlessness), they may turn to using/misusing alcohol as a form of coping (Capraro, 2000).

The effects of trauma are compounded for males because of the “cultural narrative identity” (Loseke, 2007, p. 663) of Western masculinity which prohibits the expression of most emotions (besides anger) and tell men to suck it up and take it “like men.” “Real men” should not share feelings, admit weakness, or show vulnerability (Furman & Dill, 2012). Capraro (2000) believes proposing any solution for addiction that leaves the Western notion of masculinity intact has little chance of success. This opens the door to the possibility of approaching the problem of addiction in men by addressing social roles, emotions, and masculinity.

## **Men and Emotions**

For decades, excessive alcohol use was attributed to its ability to relieve distressing emotional states or enhance positive feelings and experiences; current studies instead point to alcohol’s ability to impact cognitive processes which indirectly shift emotional responses (Sayette, 2017). Alcohol might aid the addict in running from or running to some state of feeling or being but also impacts addicts’ ways of thinking. Maté (2010) writes about what an addict searches for as they use (p. 272):

The addict dreads and abhors the present moment; she bends feverishly only toward the next time, the moment when her brain, infused with her drug of choice, will briefly experience itself as liberated from the burden of the past and the fear of the future—the two elements that make the present intolerable.

Bateson (1972) describes what it might feel like when the addict imbibes to relieve painful or uncomfortable feelings (p. 329):

His anxieties and resentments and panic vanish as if by magic. His self-control is lessened, but his need to compare himself with others is reduced even further. He feels the physiological warmth of alcohol in his veins and, in many cases, a corresponding psychological warmth toward others. He may be either maudlin or angry, but he has least again become part of the human scene.

Men regulate emotional experiences to conform to social norms by dampening displays of “powerless” emotions and amplifying expression of “powerful” emotions (Adams, Hess, & Kleck, 2015). Boudry (2008) argues the lessons boys learn in school—emotions are for girls and off limits to boys—are detrimental to men’s mental health and well-being; and goes on to say that the price we pay as a society is that men bottle up feelings, are out of touch with their emotions, and can often become criminal, anti-social, or violent (toward others and themselves).

Parents, peers, and teachers discourage males from expressing emotions and as a result grown men show deficits in identifying and expressing emotions that reflect a sense of vulnerability or express attachment (Levant, Allen, & Lien, 2014). Our emotional lexicon, the words we have available to describe emotional experiences, impacts how we perceive, categorize, and express how we are feeling (Goddard, 1995). Loseke and Kusenback (2008) write that “emotional competence requires social actors to learn the countless and situated

elements of emotion cultures, including how to name, categorize, subjectively experience, regulate, evaluate, elicit, suppress, change, and display various emotions” (p. 519).

Children are socialized through family and cultural stories with language as the primary vehicle and eventually learn to tell the stories of their own lives using emotion words and other metaphors to which they have been exposed (Bruner, 1990). Anger is one of the more socially acceptable forms of emotional expression available to men and is what participants in my groups report as a feeling they experience often and regularly. A different concept or word for anger or for the bodily sensations normally attributed to what we call “anger” could create an opportunity for different emergent emotional feelings, responses, and understandings (Barrett, 2009). This knowledge was my rationale for using the Blob Tree (Wilson & Long, 2017) in Appendix A4(a) and Plutchik’s (1960) Wheel of Emotions in Appendix A4(b) as a check-in and check-out for each Guided Journaling and Storytelling Group session.

I introduced a larger vocabulary of emotion words and the prompts offered opportunities to use these new words as the men journaled, told, and retold their stories of trauma. My hope was participants would become more comfortable in being vulnerable and finding ways to connect to their feelings and each other. Also, I believed that having access to words that were once “off-limits” would help in reframing past narratives through cognitive changes: an emotion regulation strategy (Laws & Crewe, 2016). I saw this as a way for men to broaden not only their emotional vocabularies but their emotional understanding and expression as well. I believe participants in my groups had the chance to become more “emotionally competent” (Loseke & Kusenback, 2008, p. 519).

Knowing the men I worked with suffered various traumas that preceded their addiction, how masculinity hampered their ability to be open and vulnerable, and their emotional

expressions were limited by culture and what can be considered socially acceptable, I tried to use what I found in the literature to determine how I, as a woman and their group leader, could be most helpful to them. As you will see in the next section (discussion of facilitating the groups) and then in the demonstration of what happened in the narrative chapters that follow, the literature helped extend my understanding of these men and their traumatic experiences, and informed me on how to best help them express their emotions in broader and healthier ways.

### **Group Facilitation**

I believe that communicating in groups and processing stories of trauma and addiction can help build skills to make participants' lives better in several ways. When individuals gather in groups to learn, they improve social skills, feel responsible to each other and for the outcomes, and guide the knowledge produced and gained because of the wide array of experiences they all bring to the table (Svavarsdóttir, Ólafsdóttir, Sturludóttir, & Júlíusdóttir, 2012).

In the earlier section, *Going Back to School*, I write about having taken classes in counseling and discussed group facilitation techniques based on group therapy literature. Now I turn to examining facilitation methods through a Communication lens focusing less on structure and planning and more on interactions between, relating to, and engaging with participants.

### **Collaborative Witnessing and Compassionate Interviewing**

Through conversations and oral storytelling, my participants and I engaged in a form of relational autoethnography called *collaborative witnessing* (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013). Building the trust and confidence necessary to engage in collaboration took time, effort, and energy (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013). The goal of this endeavor was not just to generate knowledge and understanding but to do so with compassion and care (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013).

Compassion is differentiated from empathy in that compassion involves the intention to transform suffering (Vachon, 2016) and entails “helpful and merciful action” (Frost, 2011, p. 396). Compassion does not only benefit the participants, but I as a listener suffered less burnout knowing I was making a difference (Pennebaker, 1997). I looked to balance feeling compassion and caring for participants and self with my research objectives. Ellis (2016) calls this combination of goals—honoring, caring for, and supporting those we interact with and interview—*compassionate research*.

I achieved these goals by conducting research with my participants from a relational ethics of care standpoint, which means feeling with, relating to, caring for, using both reason and heart, building trust, paying attention, and being open to learning about oneself as well as the other (Ellis, 2016). I need my research to matter, to make a difference, and to contribute to “making the world a better place” (Ellis & Patti, 2014, p. 94).

Modeling how to interact and be vulnerable is an important part of collaborative witnessing. I modeled how to check in, told my own stories of trauma, and reframed stories that no longer served to move me forward. As I am not a counselor or therapist, I was not limited in what I disclosed about myself. Yalom (2005) writes that “therapists who employ judicious and disciplined self-disclosure centered in the here and now of the therapeutic relationship” (p. 162) can facilitate client openness. For the purposes of my groups, I believe that if I remained “judicious and disciplined” as I self-disclosed, I would have run the risk of seeming guarded and inauthentic. I instead chose to share openly for the sole purpose of modeling and encouraging, never in an effort to seek validation or approval.

I modeled telling stories in detailed ways, talked about how I felt in the past and how I feel now looking back, and I was open to my participants’ questions, comments, and insights

about the stories I told. I explained how my stories evolved over time, how understandings of myself and my place in the world changed as I grew and learned, told and retold my stories. I demonstrated the ways we can heal, forgive ourselves and others, understand who we are, connect to others, and become stronger by first facing then storying traumatic events from our past we've tried to stuff down and avoid.

Validating techniques are integral to compassionate interviewing. Freud's greatest discovery was the incredible sense of validation people feel when their voices and stories are heard by attentive listeners (Parry, 1991). I encouraged participants to share their stories of pain and trauma out loud because healing is found in the telling *and* being witnessed (Rosenthal, 2003), but I did not force anyone to do something they were not comfortable or ready to do. Knowing it is in that space of validation we are able to test out new stories, rewrite wrongs, and story ourselves into the people we want to be, I offered to give feedback privately and in writing to accommodate and ease fears.

I validated, encouraged, empathized, and helped bring participants out of the darkness by having them narrate "themselves out of the situations" (Rosenthal, 2003, pg. 920). Remembering I am human first and researcher second was vital to working through some issues that arose during the process of interactive interviewing (Josselson, 2013). I remained flexible and reflexive, ready to guide and respond, regardless of the direction in which the emerging interaction took the group conversation (Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy, 1997). I knew participants had weekly access to counseling at The Salvation Army and a few times, I referred a client to their counselor because a traumatic memory surfaced causing them to relive the pain.

## **Interventions and Strategies**

Journaling, storytelling, and collaborative art projects are not therapy but therapeutic tools used to cope with life stressors. Through these activities, men who participated in my groups found healing from past trauma and loss and built resilience to overcome future obstacles.

### **Writing and journaling for healing from trauma**

Victims of trauma find relief in regular journaling (Bass & Davis, 1988; Faria & Belohlavek, 1984; Graves, 1984; Lindahl, 1988). Keeping a journal affords survivors of trauma opportunities to reinterpret traumatic events in ways that build their sense of control and agency (Parr, Haberstroh, & Kottler, 2000). The healing begins when we open up, explore deeply, and dig into an event which has had a major impact on our lives (Pennebaker, 2012). To feel the benefits, we must not shy away from or inhibit thoughts and feelings about the event, but instead, write freely, continuously, and without worries of spelling or sentence structure (Pennebaker, 2012). Narratives having the potential to heal are image laden, vivid, and told in great detail; include both negative and positive experiences; and show insights we've gained through writing and rewriting about the event (DeSalvo, 1999). Journaling in these ways can lead to better moods, stronger immune systems, improved blood pressure/heart rates, and overall better health (Pennebaker, 1985; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988).

To reap the benefits of writing and journaling, we must create coherent and meaningful stories helping us make sense of tragedy and trauma we may have suffered (Pennebaker, 2012). Once we organize the chaos into something manageable, the stories that seem to haunt and disrupt our lives will hold less power over us (Pennebaker, 2012). I did not demand particular stories from participants and instead prompted for stories they might have needed to tell. The



prompts were specific enough so they were not confused by the instructions, yet vague so they had latitude and explored stories they needed and chose to tell.

Adhering strictly to historical facts is not a prerequisite for journaling and storytelling for healing. Any retelling of the past includes “spontaneous selecting, smoothing, and shaping” in an effort to make sense of and understand the past in light of the present (Freeman, 2009, pg. 154). I encouraged the men to try different ways of telling their stories to create new understandings and fresh opportunities to unearth new meanings from distressing past events. Having an opportunity to tell and retell stories of trauma and loss to a variety of listeners afforded them the chance to tap into interpretations they may not have had access to before. If victims of trauma could go back and rewrite a story that might be considered the foundation of his addiction, might the revised, reinterpreted, reimagined story be one of survival and hence, sobriety?

### **Narrative reframing**

“Stories are lived before they are told” (MacIntyre, 2013, p. 212). Telling, storying, retelling, or (re)storying our lives is how we construct and revise our identities to help benefit our psychological and relational well-being (Koenig Kellas, 2008) as well as our physical well-being. Stories we tell and are told give meaning to our lives, help us negotiate our identities, and reckon with passage of time; they shape us and shape our understanding of the world; and they can be revised and retold in an effort to make sense of trauma and loss (Bochner & Riggs, 2014).

The stories we are told and we tell become the frameworks for the way we understand ourselves and our lives. Sometimes those frameworks trap us within storylines that no longer serve our best interests. We then must deconstruct and reframe (rebuild) debilitating life narratives to open possibilities of empowerment instead of victimization (Kiesinger, 2002). I gently challenged participants who told stories in rote ways to try including new details or

perspectives. I informed them gently that in repeatedly telling those stories in the same ways, we can be held hostage by those original versions shaping or limiting how we move forward in life.

One of my goals for this project was to help group members to structure, frame, and make sense of disjointed, chaotic, fractured stories. Only then could they reframe stories of trauma so they can begin to work through them. For the story of an event to make sense, it must have a beginning, middle, and end (Carr, 1986); structure and sequence to storied events should help sweep us forward (Hart, 2011); and, characters must engage in action. We must decide which characters will figure prominently, who moves the story along, and who can be left out (Carr, 1986). I encouraged participants to tell their stories with beginnings, middles, and ends they did not seem to have when they were living within them (Crites, 1986). A coherent life, a coherent identity, is not readily accessible; it must be made, remade, told, and revised from each new vantage point available to the one doing the living and telling (Crites, 1986). I wanted them to have the chance to make sense of story that might be haunting them, a story keeping them trapped in a cycle of chaos and pain.

### **Collaborative art**

When running the grief groups with adolescents in prison, we incorporated art into most activities. There are valid reasons for doing this. Healing, rehabilitation, and growth happen in the actual making of art (Malchiodi, 2007). Creative acts are invitations to relate to others and meaning-making is not done in isolation (Moon, 2016). To enhance and promote group cohesion, I incorporated group art activities into my curriculum. When participants were embarrassed or reluctant to be creative in front of others, I encouraged and validated all efforts as artistic accomplishments (Riley, 2013).

While I incorporated art and poetry into my sessions, I did not do so for the purposes of evaluating, interpreting, or analyzing my participants as a counselor or therapist might. Instead, I played the roles of facilitator, modeler, and participant-observer. Journaling with words was just one part of what we did in group, but incorporating art helped us go deeper. Journaling with words alone was impossible for some and insufficient for others. Words help us interpret feelings, but images and imagery reveal what's happening deep inside, what we might need from the world, and are embodied ways of expressing emotions (Ganim & Fox, 1999).

I found participants willing to try everything I proposed. One session I do not incorporate into **The Story of Group** is "music night." The prior week, I asked participants to write the title of one of their favorite songs down. This prompted questions like: favorite? What if it's inappropriate? I let them know it could remind them of a loved one, of a happy time, of a turning point, or just something they enjoy. I told them I was not easily offended and if they needed to hear a song that mattered to them, there was no such thing as inappropriate. I looked up and compiled the lyrics, then brought in lyrics of all the songs for each participant. Before playing their songs, I asked each member to share why they picked the song and what it means to them. Then we listened and discussed what we heard and felt after listening. This activity is one all participants enjoy and bring up long after their round of sessions are over.

I've written about my life and how this journey led me to work with people who suffered childhood traumas and now struggle with addiction. I've included research regarding this specific population (adult males) and incorporated theories on group work and communication strategies into interventions I believe can help. Now I ask readers to follow me into the conference room of The Salvation Army ARC in Tampa, Florida.

## **WELCOME TO GROUP (PREFACE)**

Once everyone is seated, I introduce myself and tell the participants that I am a Ph.D. student at the University of South Florida. I let them know they are participating in a research project which will be the basis for my dissertation and that the final product will be published one day in the future. I field questions about how long it takes to get a degree, why I'm interested in doing this, if I'm a counseling major, and what I'm going to do after I graduate. Most participants are eager and willing while a few are silent and leery. I don't push. I address their concerns and throw out open-ended questions to prompt discussions.

Next, I have everyone introduce themselves. I ask what they think about journaling and if they've ever done it before. They ask how long each group runs, how many weeks they'll have to show up, and if they have to keep coming. I let them know each session runs an hour and a half, the full round runs twelve weeks, and they can stop at any time. I make it clear once they leave they cannot return and must wait for the next round to try again. I ask why they signed up, what they might hope to gain from participating, and how they are feeling right now.

When the conversation lulls, I hand out Informed Consent documents (included in Appendix 3), a brief life-satisfaction survey, and an open-ended questionnaire asking what participants already know and think about journaling. I take notes while the men fill out the paperwork, most turning the forms into me quickly without question. A few ask if they can decide whether or not to participate later. I let them know they have until the following week to

decide and remind them they can drop the group whenever they feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied.

Once I have most of the forms, I go over the rules (Appendix 1): confidentiality, mutual respect, the importance of participation, and no advice giving. I revisit the confidentiality rule a few times and ask if they understand and approve. After most nod, I send the rules around the table and have the men sign off in agreement. I ask if the men feel anxious about being in the room and participating. Not many feel comfortable enough to open up just yet, so I go through the common fears: Will I be accepted? Will I be understood? What if I cry? I tell them I hope we build a safe space where they will feel comfortable expressing themselves. I quickly go through the reasons for keeping a journal and let them know we will discuss journaling and expressive writing in more detail when we meet again. When I pause and ask if anyone has questions one man asks if they need to bring in their own journals. I let them know I provide all supplies including journals, markers, pens, and pencils. I feel excitement moving through the room.

As we near the end of our first session together, I pass out the reflection paper on “Hope.” I hear some moaning and sighing and I let them know that doing the “homework” is not a requirement. “I won’t kick you out for not doing the writing but you’ll get more out of being here if you try to do all the work.” The principle I follow is that participants must feel every aspect of participation is voluntary for them to get the most out of my group.

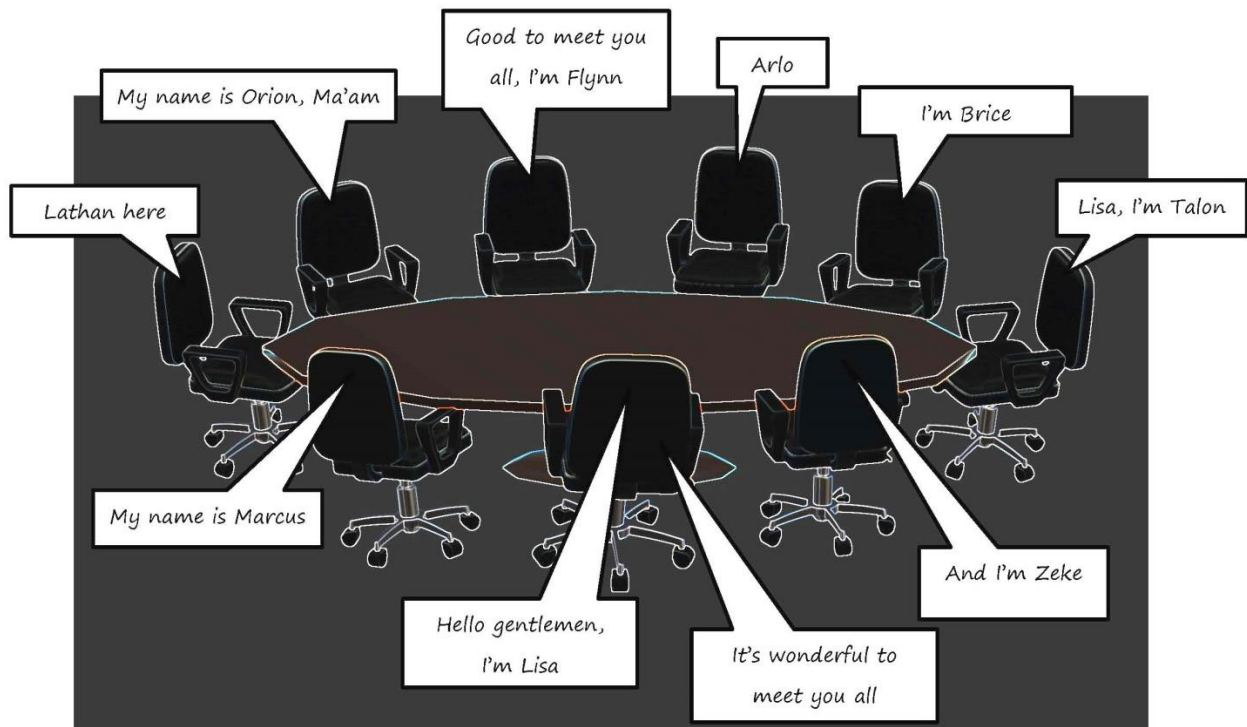
I go over the poem *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*, by Emily Dickinson in Appendix A2(a), which is the prompt for “Hope,” and watch the men’s reactions. I promise them I will not expect poetry in return. They laugh. Before wrapping up the meeting, I ask the men to take turns checking out and talking about how they feel now that they know a bit more about group. Most

seem eager to participate, while others remain silent. I can usually tell who might not return the following week. I always plan on them all returning though because I am sometimes wrong.

“When we arrive next week for group, do you all mind sitting in the same seats?” I ask.

“No, Ma’am,” Orion and Flynn say in unison while others nod and look around the table.

“Seeing you in the same places each week will help me get familiar with your faces more quickly and remember your names and stories. Thank you, gentlemen. See you next week!”



**Figure 1.** Conference room seating showing participant positions

## CHAPTER ONE:

### HOPE

All my supplies are in order: colorful pencil cases with a variety of writing utensils; Crayola® markers; journals I ordered from 4imprint®; Staples® plain white folders; additional Informed Consent documents so participants can keep a copy of what they signed; next week's reflection sheets; Sony® digital voice recorder; multi-directional table top microphone; and extra pens, just in case. Even though this will be the second time I meet my participants, butterflies fill my stomach as I load up my car. It's five o'clock and the group doesn't start until six, but it's rush hour and I don't want to risk showing up late.

I drive past the packed parking lot of the vibrant red and white Salvation Army Family Store, then turn right on the adjacent road. To my left is a dilapidated mobile home park. A young boy is riding his bike toward me, weaving side to side as the puppy he's "walking" runs back and forth across the sidewalk sniffing random bits of trash. Taking the last possible right, I turn into The Salvation Army ARC. I've shopped at the thrift store on the main road for years and had no idea a men's residential treatment center was hiding back here.

I pull up to the large, two-story white building and park in front of a red tiled column. After parking, I am somehow able to carry everything through the large glass doors in one trip. I wait my turn at the check-in desk while bodies flow through the lobby area and line up to blow into the breathalyzer contraption or hand over cell phones before being buzzed through the locked doors. A man behind the glass window slips me the sign-in sheet. He nods, indicating I

have permission to pull on the large glass door and make my way to the meeting room. Jax spots me and swoops in to help carry my supplies.

“I’m graduating tomorrow,” he tells me. Jax participated in my last round of groups and is about to celebrate his six month mark as a resident at The Salvation Army.

“Oh Jax, that’s wonderful. Congratulations! What’s next for you?” I ask.

“I’m going to see if they’ll hire me to work on the dock or drive a truck. It’ll help me stay sober if I can live here a few months longer.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.” I smile and we walk toward the conference room.

When we enter, there are a few men already seated around the oval table. Jax heads to “my” spot, the center position along one of the long sides. I opt to sit here instead of at the head of the table to bridge the gap between me as facilitator and them as participants. Jax turns to me and says, “I talked some guys into signing up. I told them it’s one of the best groups I’ve taken.”

“Awesome, Jax. Thanks for talking me up.”

“Let me know if any of them give you trouble,” he says and laughs as he heads out the door. A large, fifty-something-year-old, red-headed, red-faced white man sitting directly across from me rolls his eyes and laughs.

I glance at the clock and see it’s a quarter to six. I take a deep breath, feel the butterflies settling, and begin to set up. The red-head, Flynn, asks if he has time to get a soda. “Oh, yes, plenty of time. We’ve still got fifteen minutes before we start.”

He digs change out of his pockets, counts it on the table, and then slumps in his chair. A short, pudgy, white man with a dark brown, military-style haircut and wearing glasses walks in.

Flynn jumps up, “Hey, buddy. You got a quarter you can lend me?”

“Sure, here you go,” Orion says and counts out four quarters. “Can you get me a Coke®?”



“Yep,” Flynn says and heads out the door.

Orion plops down across from me to the left of where Flynn was sitting. He smiles, takes off his glasses, and rubs his eyes. Slowly the chairs fill and by six o’clock, all eight participants are in the room. I hand the sign-in sheet to Flynn and send a variety pack of chips to my right. Both the sign-in sheet and chips make their way around the room. I turn on the recorder, plug in the extra microphone, and say, “Good evening. Is everyone okay with me recording? Don’t forget, you can say no.”

Flynn answers, “You’re good, record away.” Others nod in agreement.

“Thank you. Welcome to our second meeting. Well, it’s our second meeting but the first of our work or rather our play. I’m handing out a copy of the document you signed last week. Do any of you have questions about the informed consent?”

Shuffling papers. Various voices say no and all eyes are looking at me.

“Did everyone get a snack? You didn’t? Here. Please take just one,” I say and pass along the remaining choices. “Okay, let’s dive in. You each have a pile of things in front of you. You have a white folder to keep all your paperwork...”

Talon, seated at the head of the table to my right, white with rosy cheeks, full head of luxurious hair and piercing blue eyes, looking like he was transported to this table straight off the set of a movie about Ivy League college co-eds, asks, “Can I write my name on it?”

“It’s yours to keep. You can decorate it any way you want. Also, you each have a pencil case with a pack of markers, ten colors, two pens, and two pencils.”

Talon, holding up his pencil case, asks, “Anyone want to trade me? I don’t like orange, but I love purple.” He glances to the other side of the table. “Dude, ple-e-e-ease...”

There’s some mumbling and shuffling and then the crash of a purple pencil case landing

on the far end of the long conference table.

“Thanks, dude!”

Lathan, a Black man in his mid-thirties with light brown, almond-shaped eyes sitting at the head of the table to my left, says, “You owe me, *dude*.”

Laughter breaks out.

Marcus who looks to be around sixty, also Black, with salt and pepper, closely-cropped hair, asks in a raspy drawl, “Hey, what’s this?”

“That’s a Blob Tree<sup>1</sup>. We’ll use that as a way to check in. I’ll explain more in a little bit. Also, you’ll see there’s this journal, one side has lines for you to write and the other side is blank in case you like to draw.”

Lathan leans in. “Cool. I’ve really wanted to get back into drawing and reconnect with the more creative, youthful side of me. When I was a kid, I used to love to draw but as time progressed, I had less and less time to sit down and actually draw. I started drawing pictures with lyrics. It’s kind of like my higher power is showing off again, because it looks like you’re bringing both words and art together in one course. Do we get to take these to our rooms?”

“All of this is yours to keep,” I say. “Even if in two or three weeks you decide this group isn’t for you, these things are yours.”

Flynn asks, “Even the markers?”

“Everything.”

Orion says, “Awesome! Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Next, I’d like to review the rules<sup>2</sup> we went over briefly last week.

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the Blob Tree is found in Appendix A4(a).

<sup>2</sup> A copy of the rules is found in Appendix A4(b).

Anyone remember the first and most important rule?"

A few in unison, "What happens in group, stays in group." Then mumbling follows.

"Hey guys, what's going on?"

Knowing glances flicker around the table like falling Dominos, and then one offers,

"Well, that's what most groups say, but we always hear our business being spread around later."

I pause, then assure, "I know this rule might be difficult to trust, but not once in the past groups I've run has anyone shared or heard anything outside these walls that we've talked about in this room. It's up to us. Chris (the director) has never asked me to share what happens in here. I am bound by these rules too. What's the one exception to this rule?"

Talon is quick to answer, "If we talk about hurting ourselves."

"Yes, if you say something about killing yourself, hurting someone else, or that someone might want to hurt you. Then, I'd have to leave this room and tell someone. I wouldn't do this without letting you know first though. Do you all understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I lean in, make eye contact with each person, and ask, "Can we all agree to maintain each other's confidentiality and commit to 'what's said in this room stays in this room'?"

Orion says, "Yes, ma'am. First rule of Write Club is you do not talk about Write Club."

"Oh, I love that! Write Club, like Fight Club."

"Aw, that was a great movie," Flynn adds.

"Yes, it was! Alright, who wants to read the next rule?" I ask.

Orion jumps in, "Me. Mutual respect. We all promise to be respectful of each other, our ideas, thoughts, stories, experiences shared during group. No side talking and no put downs. Be aware of nervous behaviors, like laughing, scoffing, or gasping while others are talking."

I look around the table, “Good, any questions about that one? No? Okay, who wants to read the next one?”

Flynn starts, “I’ve got this. We are here to support each other. While we may know of something that has been helpful to us, we cannot say that it will be of value to someone else. We can offer suggestions and input, but no advice.”

“Nice, does that make sense to you all?”

They all nod, “Yeah. Uh-huh.”

Not wanting to pressure the few who are sitting in silence, I offer, “I’ll go through the last one. This says your participation is voluntary and you are not required to share your journaling, stories, or thoughts aloud. I will give you all weekly reflection sheets and again, these are not mandatory, but I’d like to make sure you understand this—the more you participate, the more you’ll get from our time together. I don’t want you to feel burdened, but I do want you to get the most from the activities I’ve put together for us.”

Flynn says, “Yeah, I was talking to Jax earlier about joining this group and he told me it’ll be one of the best things I can do for myself. He said he was upset he didn’t do more in here and wishes he could take your class again. I’ll do it all. I’m not going to waste this chance.”

“Awesome, thank you for sharing that with us.”

Orion asks, “If we really like this, can we take your class again?”

“No, you probably wouldn’t want to. It’s exactly the same curriculum over and over. But, you get to keep everything I hand out and everything you do, so if you wanted to do the activity or reflection sheet again, you have access to it. One day, I might create a part two, but for now this is all I have.”

Zeke, a white guy in his mid- to late-forties, tall, muscular, shaved bald, and seated on

my right, asks, “What if I can’t think of anything to write?”

“That’s okay. Again, don’t feel pressured. What often happens is that hearing others tell their stories sometimes helps us remember our own stories.”

Lathan hesitantly asks, “Miss?”

“Yes?”

He continues, “I don’t think I belong in here and I might be wasting your time.”

Leaning toward him I ask, “What do you mean?”

“This is embarrassing. I, I don’t really know how to read and I don’t write so well either. I just, I was a kid who was great at sports and never really had to do much in the way of schooling. My teachers would just pass me because they knew coach needed me.”

I am in awe. “Thank you so much for sharing that with us. I want to make sure you understand that you are not a burden. The way we tell stories can vary person to person. Some draw; some write poetry, rap, and songs; others share stories out loud; there is no right way.”

Talon asks, “Can I say something to him?”

“Of course. Is that alright with you?” I ask Lathan.

“Sure.”

Talon says, “Man, that was brave. It took a lot of guts to say that out loud in this room in front of all of us. If you need anything ever, you just gotta ask. I mean it man, just ask, I’ll do anything I can.”

“Yeah, man...” A chorus of voices says thanks for sharing and being brave and others offer help as well.

It hits me that illiteracy might prevent some from signing up, could be a reason others have quietly dropped out, and may be why some wrote very little after agreeing to participate. I

fight back tears as I watch group members rise up and support him.

I turn to my right, “Thank you for acknowledging his bravery. It *is* incredibly brave to share like that to a bunch of new group members.”

I turn to Lathan, “You have done an amazing thing tonight. You modeled vulnerability for us. You showed the rest of us how to share a secret or a story we feel shame about. And the group’s response, your response (I motion to the men around the table), lets us know it’s safe to share these kinds of things out loud. Thank you so much everyone.”

I take a deep breath and smile. “Okay, let’s do a check in using the Blob Tree. Here’s what you do. There are all these guys, well, blobs, in the tree, doing different things, in different positions. Look around the tree and see which one of these blobs most resembles the way you’re feeling today. I’ll start us off to show you what I’m talking about. Okay?”

“Let’s see. I am feeling like one of these two on the platform. They’re both smiling, so either one works for me. I feel accomplished and proud. I’m near the top of the tree but not at the tippy top just yet. I’m happy that I’m here in this room with you and thankful for this opportunity.

“Do you see what I mean and how this is done? Any questions?”

All seem to be studying the page. A voice responds, “No, I think I understand.”

“Great. Who wants to try this out?”

Orion laughs, “I’ll go. I’m this guy here, swinging from the rope at the bottom of the tree. He looks like he’s having a good time and I’m having a good day.”

I ask, “Nice. Is there anything special going on that made today a good day?”

Orion pushes the paper away, leans back and says, “Nope, it’s just that I have a roof over my head, food in my belly, and clean clothes to wear.”

“Great, thanks.” I point to Talon, who’s holding his finger on the paper and looking my way. “You think you want to give it a try?”

“Sure. I’m the guy on the branch sleeping. I’m tired. My shift started at four a.m. and I tried to take a nap but couldn’t fall asleep. So, I’m that guy with the z’s coming from his head.”

“Thank you so much. That’s a great check in. I’m sorry you’re so tired. Are you going to have a chance to catch up on your sleep?”

Talon continues, “Yeah, I’ll be fine after tonight.”

“Okay, that’s good. Again, thank you.”

Zeke taps me on my arm and asks, “Can I go next?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I feel like this guy climbing the tree. If you would have asked me just an hour ago, I would have been the guy sliding down the tree, but I’m feeling better. I feel like I’ve got a grip and I’m starting to climb back up.”

“Good, wow, sometimes an hour can make all the difference. What was going on earlier? Are you willing to share that out loud with us?” I ask.

“Well, today’s my day off and I spent it with my wife and kid. We got to go to the pool for a bit. That was tough. Hanging by the pool used to mean drinking beer and chilling. But I couldn’t drink beer and that’s all I was thinking about. I got in a bad mood and ended up fighting with my wife. I know it’s all in my head and it’s my fault, but I couldn’t help it. I told her I was sorry after realizing I wasted most of our time together being a jerk and it was already time to come back here. I really didn’t want to come back. I almost didn’t come back. But we talked and she reminded me why I’m doing this. It’s for my kid, man. I don’t want to be like my father was, always drunk, always a jerk. I want to be a good dad, a good husband. So, I came back and here I

am. I feel like I'm back in the game.”

Voices rise up, “That’s sucks, man.”

“For me, it’s the beach. I don’t think I’ll ever get to go without wanting to drink.”

“I’m glad you came back.”

“Call your sponsor.”

I watch as they identify with, console and support their groupmate; then I say, “Thank you for sharing that with all of us. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been to get out of the car and walk back through these doors.”

He crosses his arms, shrugs, and sinks back into his chair.

Marcus, seated to my left, says, “I guess I’ll go next. I’m Marcus. I’m like this guy way at the top to the right sitting on the branch with his arms crossed. I’m trying to figure out what I am going to do now. I’ve lived a certain way for so many years. Now I have to find that new way of living. Get involved in different things. I don’t know how to do that. It’s not easy at all, but I’m trying. I don’t know what to expect. The only thing I know to do now is try it. I need to make a change because it’ll probably help me let things go because I don’t know how to do anything differently. I’m sixty-five. How the hell do I start over—start over with what? It’s hard for me; it really is, because I don’t know what to do. I know how to do the things I used to do. There’s a lot of things that I used to do that’s not right. I don’t have a problem stopping that but doing new things?” He pauses, still looking at the page and rubs his forehead.

I offer, “I really like what you said. Everybody knows if you have something you have to stop, you can’t just stop. There’s all this time and there’s a vacuum, a void, and it has to be filled. If it’s left empty, you end up filling it with the regular old standbys and so, you said something important, you had to stop certain things, right? But now you have to find new ways of filling



that space and time with something new, something different. I hope the activities and things we do in group give you something to do once in a while, things that you might enjoy.”

Not looking up from the paper, he says, “Well, I’m hanging in, because hopefully, we’ve got this twelve week class. I’m pretty sure something is going to come through here that’s going to capture my attention, and I can open up.”

“I hope so too, I hope so too,” I say as his eyes meet mine.

A few moments pass in silence. Brice, a white man with blonde wispy hair, wide-eyed and in his mid-twenties, softly says, “I’m kinda feeling like that guy with his back to everything. I’m overwhelmed. I don’t know if this group is for me. I’m not sure I’m going to stick around.”

“Thank you for your honest check-in. I hope you give group a chance. Maybe you’ll find something of value, something helpful, maybe not though. If you decide you do not want to be here, please do not force yourself to come in. Again, thank you so much.”

Brice glances to his left, toward Arlo, a thin, wiry, light-skinned Latino man with a full head of dark curly hair. Arlo shakes his head when we all look to him to check in.

“Are you going to pass?” I ask.

He nods in response.

I continue, “Good. He’s reminding us that at any point, during any activity, if you do not feel like sharing, you can say ‘pass’ and that’s okay. I don’t want you to feel pressured to talk. If you want to sit and listen, that works too. Okay, next?”

Flynn says, “I’m that guy lying in the grass, enjoying the outdoors, enjoying the sun. When I have free time, I go outside and try to get some sunshine and walk around and talk to the guys out there. Yep, that’s me.”

“Great, thank you.”

Everyone has spoken but Lathan. All eyes move to him. “I’m that guy, behind the glass, behind the window, separate from everyone, stuck. I was a stuck little Black boy. I don’t know if you know what I mean. I was really, really good at football; great at sports. I never had to learn how to read or write. Sports got me through. I was great at football, but now at this point in my life, I feel trapped. To get by, to do what I need to do today, I need to read and write. All these papers? I want to read them all.” He chokes up and pauses.

Tears form in his eyes and stream down his cheeks. He brushes them away and his voice cracks, “It’s like I’m locked up in a cell, and I hear the guard coming. I hear his footsteps. I hear his keys jangling. I hear the keys coming. I’m hoping when he gets near me, he’ll slow down and unlock my door. I don’t know if he’s going to open the door and let me out or if he’s going to keep me locked up. Not knowing how to read and write and sitting in this class is like I’m locked in a cell and I hear the keys coming. You know what I’m saying?”

I nod. “You used an incredibly powerful metaphor that helps us all know what it feels like to be you in this moment. Thank you so much for putting all that into words. I am amazed and grateful. Thank you.”

I glance around the room and three participants are wiping their eyes. Talon chokes out words of support, “Thank you, man. Whatever you need, anytime, just let me know, I’m here.”

My voice cracks when I say, “Thank you so much guys for checking in with me.” I clear my throat, wait a few moments then continue with Thompson’s (2011) work, “I want to go through reasons to keep a journal and its benefits. First, you can tell and retell your stories without worries of boring somebody else. You know sometimes we have to tell the story over and over and over to help ourselves make sense of what is happening. And people might say, ‘Hey, I already heard this ten times, can you tell this to somebody else!’”

Soft laughter flows through the room.

“But you can write and rewrite it and think of new things and add that into your journal and do it for yourself because usually that's why we are telling other people things, right? Usually we're saying it over and over because we need to. Next, journaling provides a map for the work you've done and shows you your journey. So if you started journaling five years ago, and then go back and read those first few pages, I'm sure it's a different “you” in those pages than the “you” today. How do you guys feel about that?”

Various voices, “Oh yeah, oh yeah.”

Lathan says, “You can look at the way that you thought then versus the way that you think now and it can actually help you clear some things up, some issues, some problems that you may have been feeling, or facing.”

I nod and smile, “Yes, exactly. And the more I learn, the more I understand about the people in my older stories, like why they did things they did, or behaved the way they behaved. Writing down the details gives me a way of looking at the whole story, the whole picture a little differently. And so maybe that will help too, you know? Revisiting the story later? Another thing is you can find your voice and there's no judgement unless you judge yourself harshly. I imagine sometimes there is self-judgment. But you don't have to worry about someone else holding something over you if you are writing in your journal, right? Sometimes it's a place to tell the truth that you have not been able to say out loud to anyone else. You can use journaling to discover yourself and learn pieces you did not know were there. How does that sound?”

“Good, good.”

I continue, “Journaling is a tool for organization and for developing strategies when working through problems. For those of you who have journaled, have you ever had something

you're facing in the future and maybe you used your journal to sort through it? For example, you might have thought, 'if I do this, this could happen or that could happen.' Sometimes if we're face-to-face with a new situation, all of the options aren't clear, right? But if you spend some time thinking about it, it might become clearer. Do any of you put major decisions off to the last minute? You know, I won't worry about that till I need to worry about that.”

A chorus of voices, “Yes, yeah, mhmm.”

I laugh, “Me too. But maybe, we could use journaling as a tool to start the process. You can use journaling to rehearse and practice when faced with difficult events. Moving to the last benefit listed here. Journaling is a way to validate you, your thoughts and your experiences. I take issue with this last point because we can't just validate ourselves by ourselves, right? Validation happens in this kind of a format (I motion around the table), among peers. It happens when you're with others. You'll say something and somebody will say, 'Oh my goodness, I know exactly what you're talking about, here's my experience of feeling those things.’”

Talon says, “Like when Zeke talked about not wanting to come back and we told him we know how he feels.”

“Exactly. If he never said those words out loud, he would not have known that some of you experience that same pull to stay gone. His feelings were validated in that moment. Nice call, Talon. So, we've talked a little bit about what you might get out of this journaling group and now I'd like to talk about how to journal. Don't be worried with how it comes out, like the pattern or the flow. Don't overthink. Just write, let it flow out of your brain and through your hand and pen. In this book I read, *bird by bird* by Anne Lamott (2007), she says that you just write. You write and you write and you write. And it might not be until the second or third page that what you were trying to say actually peeks its head out at you. Yes?”

Marcus adds, “Journaling to me is kind of like how my daughter does, she has a diary, and she writes how her day went, how she felt that day, what may have happened, more or less how things affected her. She writes her thoughts in a diary. She met a new person and blah, blah, blah. How she felt about that person. You write about how you feel instead of holding it in.”

I agree, “Right. Get it out of your system and then you can go back later and revisit.”

Orion says, “Lisa, I can’t do the dear diary thing.”

“Well, that’s okay, different things work for different people. What works for you might not work for someone else, and what doesn’t work for you might work for another person.”

I glance at the clock. “Wow guys, can you believe an hour has passed already? Let’s take the next twenty minutes to go over your reflection sheets from last week. The topic was hope.”

Brice asks, “What did she say?”

Flynn answers, “The homework she gave us, the worksheet.”

Arlo leans back in his chair, crosses his arms and says, “Oh, I totally forgot about it. I stuck the papers in a drawer in my room and never thought about it again.”

“No worries. You are welcome to participate anyway. Share a story out loud if you think of one. Stories lead to more stories (Kerby, 1991). When one person tells a story, it can remind us of something that happened to us and we think of a story to share. Another thing guys, my prompt might remind you of something totally different. Don't think that you're doing it wrong if you're talking about fear when you started talking about hope. It's okay. It's okay because this is all a process and we all have our own ways of moving through this process. Sometimes when you start writing one story, it reminds you of another story and another story and it can take you places that you didn't expect to go from this one topic. And, for any of you who want to do an assignment later, or a second time in a different way, I will be happy to give you feedback.”

Arlo mumbles, “Okay.”

I look around the table, “Who wants to share their thoughts and stories on hope?”

Orion says, “Sure, I’ll go. To me, hope is a luxury. I have hopes but they’re generic. Hope for recovery, hope for a good life, hope to be happy. I will always have hope, hope for finding the thing, or the one.”

I ask for clarification, “Looking at hope as a luxury is interesting. Do you mean hope is like an extra something for those with time on their hands to think about the future?”

Orion says, “Something like that.”

Zeke joins in, “For me, hope is like a synthetic supplement to situations beyond our control. Hope is fleeting and weak. I do everything in my power to not allow it in. Hope makes undesirable outcomes worse than they really are. I would rather act and react with logic and tenacity. Still, hope is felt every day. It’s unavoidable if you want anything out of life.”

Reflecting on his words, I say, “You’re right. Sometimes feeling hope is dangerous and risky. It seems like maybe hope has let you down.”

Zeke says, “Yes. Many times.”

We all sit silently for a moment. Flynn interrupts the silence, “Hope to me means that I still have a chance to turn my life around. I feel hopeful every day as I start to realize God has a plan for me. I just need to be patient and wait on things to work out in God’s time.”

Talon says, “Yeah, but hope is empty unless you do some work.”

“Of course,” Flynn agrees.

Talon continues, “You can hope for a promotion, but you’ve got to do a good job. You can hope to get married, but you need to work on your relationship. I hope for good health but I have to take care of myself. Also, for me, having faith in God brings hope into a brighter light.”

I say, “It sounds like you’re saying your faith in God makes hope seem real, possible.”

“Exactly.”

“Hmm, nice,” I say nodding.

Lathan says “Hope is when you cannot go any farther in life and life’s circumstance is bringing you down. You want to give up. But that means death if you give up. Then God whispers to you. When the world says, ‘give up,’ hope whispers to you, ‘try it one more time.’”

I am stunned, “Wow, that was beautiful.”

Flynn says, “Yeah man, I like that. Hope whispers.”

We all nod and I hear others repeat, “Hope whispers.”

Brice starts, “Here’s my story about hope. Today I sat at the bus stop. Warm air, slight drizzle of rain, cigarette butts and beer cans littered the surrounding area. Behind me sat an old rusted out car that resembled one that just months ago I considered home...and safe. The guy on the other side of the bus stop was clearly drunk or high. He was stuck somewhere between a state of psychosis and unconsciousness. Only a few months ago, I would have been stuck somewhere between jealous and wanting to rob him. Hope is the absence of desire to live a life where living in a car seems normal, a life where I was the guy on the bench. Today, hope took the form of the bus that picked me up and brought me back to the ARC.”

This is the first attempt at an actual story and it is amazing. Brice includes vivid details, thoughts and feelings, taking us into that moment and inviting us to sit with him at the bus stop.

“Thank you, Brice. As you read, I imagined I was there with you at the bus stop. You write well.”

He blushes and thanks me. “I really like writing. I am hoping to do more of it.”

Flynn excitedly says, “Man, I know exactly what you’re talking about. I want to yell at

them and tell them to come and try out the ARC. But, then I remember back when I was where they are, there's no way I'd listen."

Talon says, "Yeah, being here at the ARC is the most hopeful I have ever been in my life. I have a loving family who keeps me hopeful, knowing they forgive me for all the bullshit I put them through. Today, the greatest hope I have is knowing that my Lord and Savior still loved me enough to pull me from the grave I was digging for myself. He held on long enough for me to learn of this place and get accepted."

"Wow, powerful metaphor for living with addiction, digging your own grave, thank you for sharing that." I turn to Marcus, "Last but not least..."

Marcus reads directly from his paper, "At times I'm hopeful, hopeful that this storm will pass, hopeful that I will one day overcome addiction. I hope that my wife and children will one day understand that I never intentionally caused them harm. I hope I can make up for all the lost time and opportunities that have passed. I hope that my best has yet to come, that I will one day have better days. I hope I can become more than I am today. I hope God has a plan for my life. I hope God hears my prayers, I hope God sees fit to heal me. I hope God removes the pain and hurt that have taken up what seems to be a permanent residence in my heart."

"That is beautiful. It's like a mantra or a prayer based on the word hope. Thank you."

He says, "You're welcome."

I ask, "Do you all mind if I collect the completed reflection sheets? If you don't have anything written down, hold on to it and don't forget that if you feel like completing it at a later date, I'll be happy to read through it."

Voices say, "Thank you. Thank you. Thanks."

After collecting their papers, I say, "I just want to remind you all, the very first day we



came in here I talked about how there's healing in writing and there's also healing in being heard. I want to bring it up again. Most of you shared your stories out loud. I really appreciate you and I hope that as we move forward, you will find that there is healing in telling your stories and find it helps to have your story heard, really listened to, and acknowledged.”

Talon is pensive and says, “I can see how it might help. I know when Marcus talked about hoping his kids would one day understand he didn’t mean to hurt them—that he was in his addiction—I can totally relate. It made me think of all the crap I’ve put my kids through. They’re living with my parents now. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to get custody of them again. I don’t know... I share his hope that one day they might understand my disease and forgive me.”

Flynn adds, “Yeah, and I forget to be thankful sometimes for being here at the ARC. Community living is no party; it’s hard.”

Scoffing and laughter erupt.

Flynn continues, “But I know we’ve got it good, like Orion said, we’ve got food, a roof over our heads, fellowship. I’m hopeful that I’ll learn how to live a more normal life; that I’ll be able to hold down a job because I’m not drinking all day long or spending all night getting high.”

I tell them, “Great, you’re demonstrating one of the things that can happen when we share stories and ideas out loud. We relate more easily to others when we see that their thoughts, experiences, and struggles are similar to our own. Now let’s move on to how you write your stories and what you might include.

“What’s the usual way we write a story or journal? It goes something like this: I bumped into so-and-so this morning, we went to the store, I bought a shirt, and we ate in the food court. Right? It’s like a step-by-step guide to the events of our day. I’m going to challenge you to go deeper. For writing to be healing, it should include details. Include tons of details, be descriptive

and include thoughts and feelings as well (DeSalvo, 1999). Remember Brice's story about being at the bus stop? He described the beer cans littering the ground, the rusted out car he might have used as a place to sleep, the way the other guy looked, the way he was feeling as he sat there observing. His was a great example of some of the details you might include as you write.

“For some of us, this is hard and for some of us, this comes easy. All I'm asking is that you give it a try. We'll keep talking about this as we move through our sessions. I'll tell my own stories as a way to give examples of how to do what it is I am asking of you. Any questions? No? Okay, before we go over next week's reflection paper, I'd like to give you this info sheet.

“This is a list of the common reactions to trauma (found in Appendix A4(c)). Listed are the physical responses, cognitive or thought responses, emotional responses, and behavioral responses. We can be reminded of trauma we experienced a long time ago through an event today and we may have one of these reactions. Take a minute to read through and let me know what you think.”

Silence while they pass around the document and read over it.

Zeke asks, “Oh these don't read directly across, do they?”

“No, they read down. For example under physical reactions, we see neck tension, feeling jittery, an upset stomach, feeling tired, teeth grinding; have any of you had a roommate that grinds their teeth?”

Brice whispers as he doodles on the handout, “I'm a grinder.”

I continue, “Go ahead and look at this and circle some of the symptoms you feel or think happen to you when you feel stressed or feel might be a result of a trauma in your life.”

After a few minutes, Flynn shakes his head. “I must have had a lot of trauma in my life.”

“Do you want to share what you've circled?” I ask.

“Under physical, I circled fatigue, difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating; under cognitive, changes in the way I think, nightmares, difficulty making decisions, loss of self-esteem; under emotional, sadness, grief, depression, numbness, feeling helpless and hopeless, emptiness and despair; and under behavioral, alcohol and drug abuse, and neglect of health.”

“Mhmm,” I encourage, “you’re experiencing many of the symptoms. Who’s next?”

Brice reads, “Spacey, fear, inability to feel safe, guilt, despair, isolation from others.”

“Hmm, interesting. You are an emotional responder. Did you leave some of the physical and cognitive words out or did you read out all the ones you circled?” I ask.

He answers, “No, I read all the ones I picked.”

“We can all be different in the ways that we respond to trauma or traumatic memories.”

Lathan asks, “What is trauma? I don't even know what trauma is.”

“Trauma would be anything that threatens to harm you or causes actual harm to you or your loved ones. Any terrible event can be considered traumatic.”

“Like a car accident?”

“Yes, that qualifies as trauma.”

“When someone you love dies?”

“Definitely traumatic. I think it’s anything that can change the way you think of yourself and your life. Child abuse, rape, earthquakes, getting bad news about your health, and things like that are all considered traumatic.”

Flynn says, “You know what I find interesting? Even though there’s almost a thirty year difference between me and him (points to Talon), I guarantee you we both have pretty much the same ones all due to alcohol and drug abuse.”

Talon nods his head. “Yep, pretty much.”

“Hmm,” I say, “so you're saying some of these reactions are due to addiction?”

Flynn grabs his sheet and goes down the line, “Yes, drug and alcohol abuse leads to sadness, grief, depression, anger, numbness of feelings, hopelessness, helplessness loss of joy, guilt, emptiness, and despair. All those things are what drugs and alcohol do to you and I'm sure anyone else in here would say the same thing.”

Heads nod in agreement. “Yes, yep, mhmm.”

Flynn continues, “And no matter the age difference, it's the same, it does the same thing to us thirty years ago that it does today. Drug and alcohol abuse is traumatic.”

Zeke adds, “Living is traumatic. All the other events are just things that happen, but being alive for me is trauma.”

Talon says, “And life is more traumatic when you're drinking and doing drugs.”

Flynn is still talking, “It gets so bad for some people, the drugs and alcohol, you literally, I don't want this to sound morbid, but you literally see your friend die and you say ‘oh that's so sad. Wait a minute; does he have a bag of dope in his pocket?’ You go and you get the dope out. He's not going to need it. You become desensitized to the trauma because like he said, you're just living in it, day in and day out.”

I hear agreement from around the table, “It surrounds you. You just get used to it.”

“It sounds like you are all familiar with the repercussions, the feelings and thoughts that pop up as a result of trauma. One of the reasons I gathered this info for you and had us discuss trauma as a group is to show you these are common and normal responses. When you feel yourself suffering with insomnia, or irritability, or hyper-vigilance, or nightmares, or fatigue, know that it is not wrong or bad. Don't worry or think that you're different or abnormal. These symptoms and feelings are normal responses to trauma and traumatic memories. A man who

survived the holocaust wrote, ‘An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior’ (Frankl, 1984, pg. 20).

“Moving on; I found this packet online (Appendix A4(d)) for you guys, information which may apply to you or it may not apply to you. One section deals with the effects of trauma, I think this is very important. Even if it doesn’t apply to you, it might apply to somebody you love and care about who has experienced a trauma. It can help you understand maybe where somebody else is coming from or what might be happening to somebody else when they are acting a certain way. This gives you a list of things that you can do to feel better about yourself, and your place in the world. See here on page five, things you can do every day to help yourself feel better. Do something fun or creative, get exercise, write, which is what we are doing in here. We are writing about the past, but you can also write about the future. I hope you find this helpful. You don’t have to do anything with it; it’s available for you if it interests you.”

Flynn says, “This is really helpful. Thank you so much.”

Marcus asks, “Now what are we supposed to do with this?”

“You don’t have to do anything with it. It’s reading material if you are interested.

Moving on to next week’s reflection sheet; it’s called ‘New Beginnings,’” I say.

Orion feigns dismay, “Another Emily Dickinson poem? Geez, you must love her poetry.”

Laughter erupts around the table.

Remembering Springer’s (2006) work incorporating poetry into her work with trauma and addictions, I assure, “This is the second and last Emily Dickinson poem, but there are a few more from other poets to look forward to. Poems give us a good starting place to explore feelings and emotions. We’ll even write our own collective poem later on. How do you feel about that?”

Orion says facetiously, “I guess I’ll stick around.”

Remembering that some may have trouble reading, I read the poem out loud:

*My life closed twice before its close  
It yet remains to see  
If Immortality unveil  
A third event to me*

*So huge, so hopeless to conceive  
As these that twice befell.  
Parting is all we know of heaven,  
And all we need of hell.*

I ask, “What do you all think about or hear in this poem?”

Silence.

“Would you like me to start?”

Flynn, says, “Yes.”

“When I read through this poem, I feel as though Emily is saying that she almost died twice and she’s wondering if there might be another time that she cheats death.”

Orion laughs and cuts me off, “Geez, this reflection sheet is about death. So uplifting.”

I laugh, “Well, not really about death, but instead the new beginnings that follow a near-death experience. Does that make sense? This is more about how you might have changed or done things differently after surviving a near-death experience. I’d like you to write your story and include thoughts and feelings, details that help put us in your shoes. I’ll briefly share one of my near-death experiences and the impact it had on my life. I had been in a car accident.”

Arlo taunts, “Was it your fault?”

“No, it was not. I was stopped at a red light on Dale Mabry and a guy in a van slammed into me from behind. I found out later that he was trying to eat a taco and drive at the same time. He said he didn’t notice that all the cars had stopped.”

Flynn asks, “That was your near death experience?”

“No, good question though. I had the usual issues after the accident—sore all over, stiff neck and back, my car was in the shop for weeks, and I had to rent a car so I could go to work and pick up my kids. A few weeks after the accident, my left foot and leg went numb and tingly. This slowly spread to my right foot, then leg, then everything from the waist down felt like pins and needles. It was painful to walk and sit. I thought my circulation was being cut off and was worried I’d lose function of my legs or worse. I called my doctor and asked what he thought it might be. He scheduled an appointment for that day, which left me feeling even more scared. He ran tests and found my circulation was fine, so he sent me for an MRI. The MRI showed a growth in my spinal cord. They thought it might be a sign of Multiple Sclerosis, MS, or a tumor. One doctor told me to get my affairs in order, that I might not survive the surgery, or that I might be paralyzed, and that I needed to make sure my kids were taken care of.”

Zeke says, “Shit. That sounds scary.”

“Yes. I felt my world closing in on me. My kids were five and ten. How could I leave them behind? I wasn’t done being their mom. I didn’t know what I should be hoping for: MS or a tumor. You know, what does one pray for? I realized the best prayer was just, ‘God, please let this be whatever it is that has the best outcome.’ I left it in God’s hands and went through weeks of tests and finally scheduled an invasive spinal cord surgery to remove the mass. My life had been a mess up to this point. I felt ashamed for the life I was subjecting my kids to, but I refused to waste my precious and maybe scarce time dwelling on it. I saved my energy for being strong in front of my kids and being hopeful in the face of this terrifying surgery.

“Thankfully, I survived the surgery—as you all can see—and as I was coming off the anesthesia and was able to think coherent thoughts, I asked the nurse for a pen and paper. I started making a list of things I would do differently when I was strong enough: save for a down

payment for my own apartment, ask for a promotion at work or find a better job, become more involved with my kids, take some classes, and get out of a toxic relationship. I had let myself float along in life, not wanting better for me and my kids; I had become someone I did not respect. Slowly but surely, I broke up with my partner and moved into my own apartment, took on full custody of my son, and saved for a down payment on a new car, something we'd never had. I wanted to build a life I'd be proud of, a life my kids could enjoy, become a mom they'd be proud of, become a woman who did not regret where she was and how she was living.

“After surviving, now, every so often, I take an inventory: Am I living a good life? Am I living a life my kids can be proud of? Am I proud of the legacy I'll leave behind? Most often, the answer is yes. When the answer is no, I make the necessary changes. That's an example of the work I am asking you to do over the next week. Do you understand what I mean?”

Flynn responds, “Yeah. Can we write on the back of this too?”

“Yes, use as much room as you need to tell your story. Give details, describe feelings you felt then and now as you think back on that time. When writing, ask yourself how that story impacts your life today. You can use the poem as a springboard for your thoughts, or dive straight into your story if you know which story you'll write about.

“Oh my goodness, we only have a few minutes left. Let's wrap up with a one word check-out. I'll start us off. I'm feeling...energized.”

Orion scoffs, “Energized? I'm exhausted.”

I say, “Okay, good, exhausted. How about you?” I point to Talon.

Talon says, “Intrigued.”

“Nice, next?”

Zeke adds, “Content.”



Flynn laughs, “Man, you took my word. Okay, um, peaceful.”

Brice says, “Serene.”

Arlo mumbles, “Pass.”

Lathan says, “Hopeful.”

Marcus gathers his papers and says, “I’m okay. I’ll be okay.”

“Alright gentlemen. Our time is up. Thank you so much.”

Marcus shakes the stack of papers at me, “Do we bring all this stuff in next time?”

“Yes, great question. Guys, please do not forget to bring all these things in next week: your folder, journal, pencil case with markers, pens, and pencils. And if you are able, complete the reflection sheet on New Beginnings. Thanks again and see you next week.”

I retrieve what’s left of the chips and pack up my supplies. I do not pack up the sign-in sheet. I need to turn it in to the main office on my way out. Beneficiaries suffer consequences if they cannot prove they attended the required number of groups.

This went well, I think to myself. I hope my story sounded coherent. Did I demonstrate what I’m asking them to do? Were there enough details? Will they even remember my example? I feel someone walk back into the conference room.

Jax bellows, “Lisa! How’s this new batch of guys? You liked us better, right?”

I laugh and tell him that each group is unique and brings its own flavor.

As he walks away, he laughs and says, “You know we were your best group.”

I get everything back to the car and sit for a few moments, reflecting on tonight’s session. Their characters are starting to show. Lathan feels like he doesn’t belong yet he managed to communicate and share in a way that promoted bonding within the group. Arlo refuses to participate so far; I wonder what he’s waiting for or what worries he might have. Flynn is

boisterous, eager, and willing. Orion the jokester is quick to call me out; he seems to be hiding a dark side. Marcus is pensive, thoughtful, and careful with his words. Brice is quiet and soft-spoken and timid. Zeke seems to have so much on the line. Talon is childlike and hopeful.

They are willing to address each other and speak up. I notice Flynn identifies with Talon and feels responsible to him in some way. We all laughed when they realized they are from the same small town in Arkansas. Maybe Flynn sees Talon as the younger version of himself.

Maybe poetry wasn't the way to go in terms of material for the reflection sheets. I'll see how this group of participants responds as I move forward before changing anything. Overall, I feel confident and satisfied with how they are interacting and responding so far and feel excited about the work we will do together. I wonder if all eight participants will return next session.

Ring. Ring. Ring. My trance is broken by my daughter's phone call.

"Hey, sweetie. Oh, it's Friday! When do you hit the stage?" I ask.

"I don't go on until after ten. You've still got time. What are you doing?"

"Just finished running group. I'll run home and change before heading to Ybor."

"Sounds good, Mom. Did you eat yet? I'm starving."

"Nope, I'm hungry too. We'll grab a slice when I get there, probably around nine."

"Yay," she squeals. "Perfect. Sound check is at nine thirty. I'm trying out my new ukulele and I wrote a couple new songs."

"Oooooo, I am so excited! Can't wait. Will you still play *Sugar Rush* for your mama?"

"Of course, Mom," she says. "I gotta run. See you soon." Click.

## CHAPTER TWO: NEW BEGINNINGS

I arrive this week with only five minutes to spare. Flynn, Orion, and Brice are already seated. Brice seems to be working on the reflection paper. He smiles and says, "I had some final thoughts to write down."

"Oh, nice," I nod.

Orion interjects, "He just waited 'til the last minute to do his homework."

"Nuh-uh," Brice retorts.

"It doesn't matter," I say. "Just because you're writing now doesn't mean you haven't been thinking about it all week. We all work at our own pace and do what we can."

"So there," Brice mumbles to Orion.

Others are sitting down. Flynn jumps up and yells, "I forgot my stuff!"

"Go get it; we have time. Anyone else needing to get your supplies, run get them."

It's three minutes past six when everyone is finally seated.

Commotion from the hallway invades the room. I ask, "Lathan, is the door closed?"

"No ma'am," he says and jumps up to close it.

"Hello gentlemen. Welcome to our third meeting. Are you all okay with me turning on the tape recorder?"

Arlo answers, "No."

"Okay, I will not turn it on yet. What's going on? Are you okay?"

He continues, “A recording device got me put in this place.”

I know The Salvation Army is not a lock-down facility and that people are here voluntarily. I push, “Oh, I didn’t know that you could be put in here. I thought it was voluntary.”

Arlo snarls, “Well, my wife gave me an ultimatum. Then she and her attorney went behind my back and recorded me and filed charges and this is part of the stuff I have to do to avoid jail. I have to be here otherwise I’ll end up doing time. I can’t trust anyone. So, if you want me to participate, don’t turn that thing on.”

“Okay, if you do not want me to record, I will not.”

Flynn leans in, looks down the table at Arlo, and says, “Man, she can’t help others if we don’t let her record what we’re saying. I know I want to be part of that. Don’t you?”

Voices chime in, “Yeah.”

Flynn double checks with me, “You said you’d keep this confidential, right?”

“Absolutely. I will keep your confidence. No one listens to this recording but me. I will use the information on it, but I will make sure nothing identifies you; no names or birthdates.”

Orion jokes, “Names have been changed to protect the innocent.”

Laughter.

“Or, not so innocent,” a disembodied voice says.

More laughter.

I look around the table, “And, we all make that commitment together, right guys?”

All nod in agreement.

I continue, “If we learn that someone has shared anything said in here with someone outside of this group and room, they will be asked to leave. I need to make sure you feel safe sharing your stories.”

Arlo crossing his arms leans back and says, “Fine, you can record; I just won’t speak.”

I offer, “How about this? When you want to speak and if you’d like it off the record, tell me. I’ll pause the recording and then you can share. Let me turn this on and show you something. See this steady red light? This means I am recording. Now, I’ll pause it. See what happens? The red light blinks. This way you’ll know I am respecting your wishes. Does this help you feel more comfortable?”

Arlo answers, “Sure, go ahead and record. I don’t know that I want to talk in front of these guys anyway. I pass for check in.”

“Okay, thank you. Anyone else have any objections to me turning this on?”

Marcus shakes his head, “Nope.”

“Okay, we are now recording. Welcome to week three. It’s so good to see your faces. Here are the chips. Take a bag and pass it along. I have some new things to share with you.”

Papers shuffle.

Flynn scans the sign in sheet. Satisfied everyone’s accounted for, he hands it to me.

“Thanks,” I tell him.

Orion asks, “So this study you’re doing with us, is this for your thesis?”

“Yes, I’m working on getting my Ph.D. in Communication and I will write about the curriculum I created, the stories I share with you, the stories you share with me, the ways you interact with each other and me, all of that to write my dissertation. Thanks for asking.”

“You’re welcome. I think it’s neat we get to be part of what you’re doing,” Orion says.

Talon asks, “Do you have to write a book? My brother got a Ph.D. and he had to write I think like 360 pages.”

“Yeah, I’ll write between 250 and 300 pages,” I answer. “After writing that many pages,

it'll feel like I've written a book." I laugh. "Okay, let's get back to these," I say as I shake the stack of papers in my hand. "First, take one of these and pass them down. This is called Plutchik's wheel; it's a wheel of emotion words."

I wait until everyone has a copy. "You'll see that there are six pie pieces and at the center of the pie we find what we might think of as root emotions, like sad, mad, joyful, peaceful, scared, and powerful.

"There are words that stem from or branch off of those words that mean more or are variations on the root emotion. If you take the words that branch off sad, like ashamed, lonely, miserable, guilty, you'll see they mean something different from the root word and each other.

"Some of the words I'm not sure I agree with, 'sleepy' being a branch of sad, but I might see why it's included in that piece of pie. Take a few minutes to look at this and let's check in today using the feeling wheel."

Orion jumps in, "I'm test subject number six (laughs). I'm satisfied, hopeful, I've eaten today, I've got clothing, I'm well provided for, I've got my health, I'm more blessed than plenty of people around this world and who probably deserve it more than I do. I'm more than satisfied, very content. I have no worries whatsoever. I believe in the saying do what you can and what you can't, don't worry about it."

"Test subject number six?" I ask and laugh.

"We're part of a study and we're your test subjects and...I like the number six."

"Okay then, test subject number six," I say, "I'm going to challenge one thing that you said. You don't deserve to be blessed as much as others might?"

Orion says, "Well, there are children out there who are going without shoes, without food, without clean water, and we take things here in America for granted. I'm not trying to

ruffle any feathers here. I've been in the military and I've seen people grateful who got a grain of rice; here we throw half a sandwich away at lunch."

"I understand where you are coming from. I'm not challenging that there are people who are worse off, but it sounds like you don't feel as though you deserve the good you do have."

Orion says, "Sometimes, I don't feel like I deserve it. But thank you for thinking I do."

"Okay, who's next?"

Talon says, "I'm laying low but having fun. I'd say serene and peaceful."

"Okay, I like that. Any particular reason?"

Talon responds, "Everything is kind of monotonous and the same. I try to keep a joyful spirit and a positive, motivated spirit. I know that this is all temporary, you know? God has been really reminding me of that whenever I get comfortable. So I just try to stay light-hearted and try to stay light in the situation to not let heavy stuff bother me like missing my kids and my ex trying to drag me through the courts. When I first got here, I felt like I was unworthy and not deserving of a nice place like this for my recovery. As I got healthier, and my brain started to matter again, I started to put things in perspective. I've been given a chance of a lifetime. I could be dead or still be suffering and I have to take advantage of this and be a man and let God show me how to be a man and to be fathered by something Divine, something other than myself because I can't really do it on my own."

I am struck by his contemplations, "Thanks for sharing all that. Thank you."

Brice pipes up, "I'm content, happy."

I ask, "Okay, good, nice, any special reason why?"

"Coffee," he laughs.

"Coffee? It makes me smile too, believe me."

Brice whispers, "I wasn't even going to come tonight. I'm not sure I want to be here."

"Okay. Here in this group, or here in The Salvation Army?"

Brice answers, "Here in the group. But I'm trying it out. I've been aggravated the last couple of times I got in here because I didn't volunteer to sign up for this, and I've come up with a number of reasons not to come here. But, lately I've been trying to come up with reasons why this may benefit me."

I wonder why he feels he's been forced to participate. "Okay, I'm going to ask your permission to do something."

He says, "Sure."

"Will you allow me to remind the director that our group is by voluntary participation only and I would prefer people didn't feel they were forced to come here?"

Brice's eyes get wide, "No, I'd rather you didn't."

"Okay, I won't then, I won't."

Brice seems upset now, "If you tell him I felt pressured or forced to be here, I, I, I don't want to, right now Chris and I are a pretty good level."

"Then, I'll leave it alone."

Brice stammers, "He asked me to try this, he didn't say you have to do it."

I try to reassure, "Okay, I won't say anything."

Still agitated, he continues, "He just said, 'I would like to see you sign up for class,' and the pond is smooth right now."

"I will leave it alone. That's why I asked permission. I won't say a word, okay, thank you, and thank you for checking in."

I take a deep breath. I feel flustered and hope it does not show.



Marcus breaks the awkward silence, "I'm alright. This class reminds me of school, and it's not good memories. I hated school. I used to have to go to school beat up. My mother used to beat me and I'm sitting there swollen eye and all of that and it just, it took me back there, it just feels like school to me. I hated this class for a minute, but I'm pulling myself out of it because I just don't know what, this is hard; this is hard."

I hesitate then say, "I'm sorry you got a reminder of that. Maybe we can create a different environment for you so you don't dread, dread being in..."

Marcus clarifies, "I don't dread coming, it just reminds me, I have bad memories."

"Maybe we can create some new ones for you, right? Maybe participating in a better experience might give you a different way of thinking about it. Hopefully, we'll see..."

He stares at the wheel, "Well, this chart has neither one of the two words that's me right now. And that's lost, I'm lost because I don't know what to do and it troubles me and it scares me because I don't know what's going to happen. I'm not angry, I'm not mad, I'm not sad, I'm not happy, I'm not joyful, I'm just, I'm lost, this is all new to me."

I repeat, "You're lost and where is that, yeah."

Marcus continues, "And it's not on this paper."

"No, it is not on this paper. And I appreciate that you said that," I say as I write the word "lost" on my copy of the wheel.

"Thank you," I say and turn to Arlo, motioning if he'd like me to pause the recorder.

He shakes his head no and says, "Pass."

I nod then glance at Flynn.

Flynn says, "I'm feeling proud. I've been doing everything I'm supposed to be doing. I'm tired of throwing these chances away. This isn't my first merry-go-round, my first rodeo. I'm not

doing this again. I can't promise I'll never drink again, because no one knows really, but I'm taking advantage of this opportunity. I'm doing the right thing."

"Thanks!" I say.

"Lisa?" Flynn asks, "Can I read a story I wrote after class last week?"

"Sure, everybody okay with this?"

All nod or say yes.

"Here goes, it's called *My Friend, The Bottle*. My journey to the ARC started with me and my bottle. Normal people would not think a bottle could talk, but mine did. He became my only true friend. First thing in the morning he would say 'time for a drink, old buddy.' I listened to him and would start another lonely day. My bottle and me would walk the streets of Tampa, just the two of us, talking to each other. Sometimes we would duck behind a building and rest. He often convinced me to skip work altogether. Man, what a great time we had laughing about all those missed opportunities. We also laughed and talked about the three blown marriages and how if those dumb women would have just let me and my buddy the bottle hang out everything would have been fine. Right before I was going to run out, he never failed to remind me to go to Walmart and steal another bottle.

"Even when I got so sick I had to go to the hospital, my buddy would visit me and tell me he could not wait for me to get out. At the hospital, the doctor said 'son, you better find some new friends. This bottle guy is bad news.' I took what he said to heart and decided to try the ARC. Much to my surprise, everybody there knew this bottle guy. They all said he was bad news told me to come and be friends with them. I soon realized my bottle guy was a con artist and that I had real friends now. They told me if I worked the 12-Steps, I could learn to live without him and man they were right.

“I got this new friend and his name is sponsor. He has helped me so much. He showed me how to work the 12-Steps so I would have freedom. He convinced me I was powerless over my ex-friend the bottle and that my life was a mess. My friend sponsor made me write out a list of all the bad things I had done over the years. Man, that was a long list. I realized every time I got into trouble I had been hanging out with my friend the bottle. My friend sponsor pointed out how good things were now that I had new friends. I don't really miss my friend the bottle although he calls me all the time. I just don't answer my phone. I'm happy with all my new friends at the ARC, the changes they've helped me make, and my new life at the ARC.”

“That was amazing,” I say.

“It’s kinda like a kindergarten story,” Flynn says laughing.

“No way man, that was great,” Talon says.

“Thank you for sharing your writing with us,” I say. “Lathan?”

Lathan starts, “I’m feeling doubtful and confused. Um, I don’t know, it’s a juggling act so to speak with this whole identity crisis I’m going through right now. I feel like I’m in limbo, personality wise, it’s a thin line between the words, ways, and actions that led me here and just trying to be mindful of old behaviors, subconscious things that you might not pay much attention to that lead us back to the old ways of thinking. I find myself guarding my tone. I’ve got to pick and choose who I talk to and what I talk about. You know one conversation could cost me a good two, three hours of peace. Every minute of our time is priceless, because of the amount of chaos and confusion I’m accustomed to sorting through. I find myself having to ration the chaos out, during the week; without it, I go through withdrawals. I start making up stuff, because without chaos and confusion without something to wrap my mind around, I can’t go anywhere without a problem to solve, even though I have one of the greatest works of my life sitting right before me,

as far as making this transition from who I used to be and who I am becoming. It's still not enough, it still has to be something weak, something wicked, something destructive. I say I'm tired of it but my mind keeps returning to it. I have to try to find ways to keep that kind of thinking to a minimum.

Reminded of Frank's (2013) work on chaos narratives, I sift through his spiraling thoughts and say, "I'm hearing two things here. I hear and I've personally experienced being addicted to chaos, commotion, and swirling drama. It's a distraction. It can generate an adrenalin rush. The other thing though, it's what you know. You don't have a lot of familiarity or experience living this life as this new person, so it's hard to do what you don't know and you're creating this new person as you go along. So I'm hearing that might be part of your struggle. Here's what I have; here's what I know; here's where I've been. How do I create this new, different person?"

Lathan seems surprised that I get it, "Yeah, life throws you a curve ball. You're this new guy who's only eight or nine weeks new. He doesn't know how to handle this situation. Where do I go for advice? Everything is spinning counter-clockwise. I just want to give both of them a shot. Don't get me wrong, when I fall back into my own behaviors I'm not appalled. I know that I know better and I try to do better, but this new guy is not equipped to do life on life's terms. I know my triggers, those that make me want to smoke a blunt or drink a half gallon of gin, those resources are not there anymore."

I say, "You know where those lead and what comes along with those choices, you definitely are on a tough journey. Thank you for sharing."

I look toward Zeke and he says, "I'm going to stick to the Blob Tree. I'm this guy on the right hand by the ladder, arms crossed, knees bent, looks cold. I did this week's assignment and

it was tough.”

Knowing looks from others.

Zeke continues, “I started using that style you alluded to, about just write and write and write, don’t pay attention to things. I only had a little time available because I was meeting my sponsor, but I did something real quick and it left me feeling cold and depressed. I didn’t have a chance to complete it but I will. I’ll share later with you all but I want to continue to work on it.”

“Thank you, Zeke. I am sorry writing about the prompt left you feeling cold.”

I pause and breathe then look around the room, “So, Zeke was talking about this week’s reflection sheet on new beginnings. Before we get to that, I’d like to hand these out.”

“Oh, no. Coloring?” Marcus asks.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do in here. These are mandalas and yes, you color them. I’ve made you each a packet of fifteen and have more if you run out of pages to color. Can you pass these around please?”

“Oh, Lord,” Marcus grumbles.

Brice laughs and says, “I’ll take yours if you don’t want them.”

“Nah, I’ll give it a try,” Marcus says as he tucks a packet into his folder.

Immediately, Brice, Lathan, and Talon start coloring the mandalas.

I try to get everyone back on track, “Okay, back to the homework you all did. Who wants to start us off? Anyone want to share what they wrote?”

Marcus sighs heavily, “Remember when I said this class reminds me of school. Well, when I sat down to try this out, I had a flashback and I couldn’t do this assignment. I couldn’t wrap my head around doing this thing that reminded me of school. It was a bad time, you know. But I’ll try with the next one. I’ll give it a try.”

I nod and say, “That’s all I could ask for. Thank you for telling us what it feels like for you to be in here. Please remember you are not required to stay. It is up to you if you choose to continue.”

Marcus adjusts his papers, “I might as well stay; I’m in it now.”

I smile and say, “Okay.”

Orion leans in and asks, “Lisa, what are the parameters? What’s off limits? What are our boundaries with this creative writing thing?”

I answer, “I am not putting any boundaries on you. You write about whatever you want to write about.”

“What if a curse word slips out?”

“Ah, I understand. You are not writing for me, you are writing for you. You write whatever flows from you. You write what you are thinking and feeling. What will be most helpful to you is your honest reflection. What’s going to help you is writing as your own self, not writing for me, not writing for them. If you want to fill one page with the F word, then you fill a page with the F word, if it’s what you are feeling in the moment.”

“Okay,” Orion says and sits back in his chair.

“Can I read what I wrote?” Lathan asks.

I nod.

“For me, near-death experiences are nothing when compared to emotional death. I’ll survive until I’m dead. It’s an entirely different matter to be dead while still alive. Needles tore us together for months until my girl’s call took me away for a night. The call the next morning changed my life. I had been numb before his death but this was strange. Various emotions flooding in to drown me: fear sorrow, despair, regret, helplessness, and anger. All of these reach

out to me, unable to attach. I sink into an empty reality of life. What changed? Everything. How am I different? I'm calloused and calculating. What do I do differently? I have a new set of rules that keep me safe. I cannot and will not deviate. I see the world as cruel but simple. I find joy in my music and creativity. I am fully prepared for silence and betrayal.

There's chaos in Lathan's writing, but it's descriptive and includes rich, vivid details. I feel caught off guard. He said he can't write well, but his writing is really good. I say, "Wow. Your visual of being drowned by, strangled by emotions is powerful. It puts us in your shoes and allows us to imagine what it might have felt like for you. Thank you for sharing this with us."

I jot down a quick note. *Reframing might not be an option when the stories are not linear and seem to be pure chaos.* I look up and nod to Flynn who seems ready.

He reads from his paper, "I have faced several near-death experiences. One I am pretty ashamed of is the one I wrote about here. I was so desperate and thought I needed money and drugs to survive when really, I needed help. I was so deep into my addiction, surrounding myself with the wrong people. As I think and tell about this event I am embarrassed, ashamed, and filled with regret for not reaching out for help during this time.

"My best friend and I were on a mission to get a quick come-up. We knew about a guy who we thought we could get over on. A few years back, he screwed over one of our friends, so we justified our actions as revenge when we were really just low life scum bags trying to get something for nothing. We had inside info about where he kept his stash. Without hesitation, we bought a pizza and I went up to the door disguised as a pizza delivery guy.

My friend hid around the corner while I knocked on the door. We left our guns in the car thinking he was alone and we could handle him. PS - we both were out on bail for felonies. He opened the door and I ran in pushing the pizza at him. That's when my buddy was supposed to

come and tackle him or at least do something while I grabbed everything I could. But, he stalled for a minute. As I was running to this guy's bedroom, two shots were fired at my head. I dove behind the counter. I stared up and saw two holes in the cabinets that would have been in my head. My friend ran up from behind and punched him in the back of the head.” He looks up.

I respond, “How terrifying! What changed for you after that?”

Flynn laughs, “Sadly, not much. It wasn’t until I moved to Tampa and found the Sally (Salvation Army) that I could see things differently.”

I say, “And maybe realize you needed help. I cannot imagine at that point in time you really thought you needed help.”

“Nah, I thought I was exactly where I was supposed to be.”

“Thank you for sharing.”

Talon asks, “Have you ever been shot, not just shot at?”

Flynn, laughs, shakes his head and says, “Yes, and stabbed. I’ve lived a crazy life but those days are far behind me now.”

I am shaking my head too. “Thank God you’re still here!”

Orion chimes in, “Test subject number six. I’m still here too. I had about three near-death experiences but each time I was knocked out and days later woke up in the hospital. No, nothing changed me. I don't believe we can really live and enjoy life fully if we think about or fear death. When it happens, then it happens, and we can't change it. So embrace what we do have, do the best one can in life for yourself, family, God, and others. One glance at a cemetery should remind us that everybody dies, and we can't take it with us. No hearse ever pulled a U-Haul.”

I am reminded of Becker’s (1973) words, “How all-consuming the ‘terror’ of death is when we look it full in the face” (pg. 15). As participants tell their stories of multiple near-death



experiences, I wonder about the work they must do to cover and repress their knowing of just how precarious living is; maybe the “terror” of death contributes to their drug and alcohol use.

I ask Orion, “You were knocked out three times?”

Orion adds, “Yeah, once I was hit with a tire iron. Another time, I was in a car accident and got extracted by the Jaws of Life, and I’ve been hit by a car as a pedestrian a few times.”

I look around the table, “Oh my goodness, you all are walking, breathing miracles.”

Zeke starts reading, “Numerous times, death has become real to me. However the disease of addiction quickly makes me forget and immortality becomes real. Or so it seems. The more I would escape death, the more I would feel I could press the envelope a little further. It caused others to worry, but never me. Until I almost lost it all, I never realized the importance of the little things of life. With nothing to show for my thirty plus years of life, I’m realizing how powerful my addiction is and that if I continue, it will show me how mortal I am.”

“Frightening and beautifully said. Is that something you have all felt—immortal, invincible?” I ask.

Voices chime, “Oh, yes, absolutely.”

I ask, “And that feeling doesn’t change when you almost die?”

Lathan says, “It changes for a minute, but each time you survive, then you feel like you can survive something worse. It’s almost like another addiction, trying to see how far you can take it and still wake up.”

I think of Scaer’s (2001) work on childhood trauma and its lifelong effects on the body and brain. He calls this cycle of self-destructive behavior and repeated re-traumatization “trauma reenactment” (p.85). “Thank you for explaining the urge to push the boundaries to me,” I say. “Zeke, you said you’re going to keep working on this particular reflection paper?”

“Yes, I’ll see if I feel like trying to free write again.”

Remembering Pennebaker’s (1997) and DeSalvo’s (1999) work on expressive writing I say, “Research says that writing in that free-flowing, pour your heart and soul onto the pages way can make you feel a bit worse initially, worse than before you sat down to write. But if you keep at it, you have a better chance at long-term feelings of relief and healing from the traumatic event you’re processing. What do you think?”

“I’ll let you know what happens for me.”

That would be great. Thanks! Okay, who’s not gone yet?”

Talon says, “Me. Although physically, I have never had a near-death experience, in the midst of my addiction, I was completely dead inside. I did not care if I lived or died. I did not care if you lived or died. I did whatever it took to get drunk or high. Thinking back on it, I would rather die today having a soul, then live the way I did then without one. But today, I’m alive and well, swimming in serenity. For now I know I am a child of God and so are you.”

Zeke exclaims, “Amen. I like how you said you now have a soul.”

“Yes! Again, you gave us metaphors to help explain how you felt then compared to now. Thank you, Talon. Lastly,” I say as I point toward Brice.

Brice lowers his head and softly speaks through tightly drawn lips, “My near-death experience happened last year when I decided to take my own life with a belt by hanging myself. I woke up in the hospital five days later with my best friend sitting next to me crying. He explained I’d been in a coma and probably had brain damage. I was trying to remember, remember anything, but I couldn’t. I had permanent memory loss. I was told my mom found me and got me down then called 911. I can’t imagine what she saw and went through.”

His eyes fill with tears and he continues, “So, what do I do differently now? Everything.

I've changed the way I talk, the way I walk, the way I love, the way I give, the way I think, the way I react, and the way I communicate. God is back in my life and the world around has not really changed. It never will but I try and change my world I live in daily. I want the world I live in to be loving, caring, and peaceful.”

The room goes quiet. Several people wipe away tears.

I wait a few moments then say, “Oh, Brice, thank you for sharing. I’m really glad you are still here in the world. You all opened up and shared so much of yourselves and your stories. Thank you.

“So what I'm going to do now, I'm going to hand out blank pieces of paper. What you are going to do on this blank piece of paper is draw a lifeline. I don't mean like a heart monitor.”

Laughter.

I continue, “Okay? I'm talking about picking a starting point and drawing a line until today. It doesn't have to be a straight line. It can be a wiggly line or have ups and downs. Then, I want you to find a few turning points on your lifeline to talk about. This is for you. You do not have to share with us out loud. Let me hand these papers out then I'm going to explain more.”

Orion jokes, “Field trip?”

I laugh, “No, we're not taking a field trip.”

He mumbles about wishing we were going on a field trip.

“Well, we are taking a journey back in time, so, you can think of it as a field trip of sorts,” I say. “You're going to map out your lifeline starting with the day you were born and today as the end point. So the starting point is when you were born, right? And then today would be the end point because that's where we are in this moment. Then, I want you to find a couple spots on there and I'm thinking, I don't know, five, eight, ten, some of you might have twenty

turning points in your life. What's a turning point? Anybody know what I'm talking about?"

"That day the doctor slapped me on the day I was born. I don't know what he had against me," Orion says leaning back in his chair and glancing around for approval.

"Okay," I say laughing, "so the day you were born is a turning point, you are no longer in that nice little cozy womb, you're out in the world. Good. Lathan, what did you say?"

Lathan adds, "Like a milestone?"

"Good. Yes, milestones, crossroads. This does not have to be negative or uncomfortable though, maybe a high school graduation, right?"

Talon already writing says, "Sure."

I continue, "The day my child was born was huge, my first child and my second child, those are turning points, and those are good turning points, but there's also the day my parents sent me away to another country to live with my aunt and uncle. That's not a great turning point, but it did have positive parts to it, okay?"

"So what I'd like you to do is take a few minutes to quietly think about it. This isn't like five years equals an inch, this isn't about that. Maybe three things happened close together; maybe you're going to sit here and think 'I don't know what the heck she's talking about right now,' but just sit and think about your life. On your reflection paper I send home with you tonight I'm going to ask you to take one of the turning points you come up with and write a little story so that we can visit that time with you, whether it's a time of pain or a time of pleasure."

Mumbling and processing.

"I'm going to sit here, and if you have any questions, just ask. It can be like even moving to another city, you know?"

Flynn asks, "Another state?"

“Sure, another state or a new job you got, anything like that. Don’t worry if you are having a hard time coming up with your turning points, you can have time this week to work on this as well as the reflection paper. Here, let me hand these out. There's no poem on here. Go ahead and pass these down. Thank you. Everyone have a copy?”

Orion looks around the room, “Yep.”

Marcus turns to me and asks, “Now what do you want us to write about?”

“It’s really simple. Pick a turning point from your lifeline and tell us the story. Include characters, a plot line, a beginning, middle, and end to the story. After you've done the short story, try to incorporate how you felt while you were there. Put yourself in the moment again, if you can. I don't want you to do it if it's too painful. Put yourself there, how did you feel then, and then take yourself out and how do you feel now looking back. That's all on here. Okay?”

Marcus nods, “Okay.”

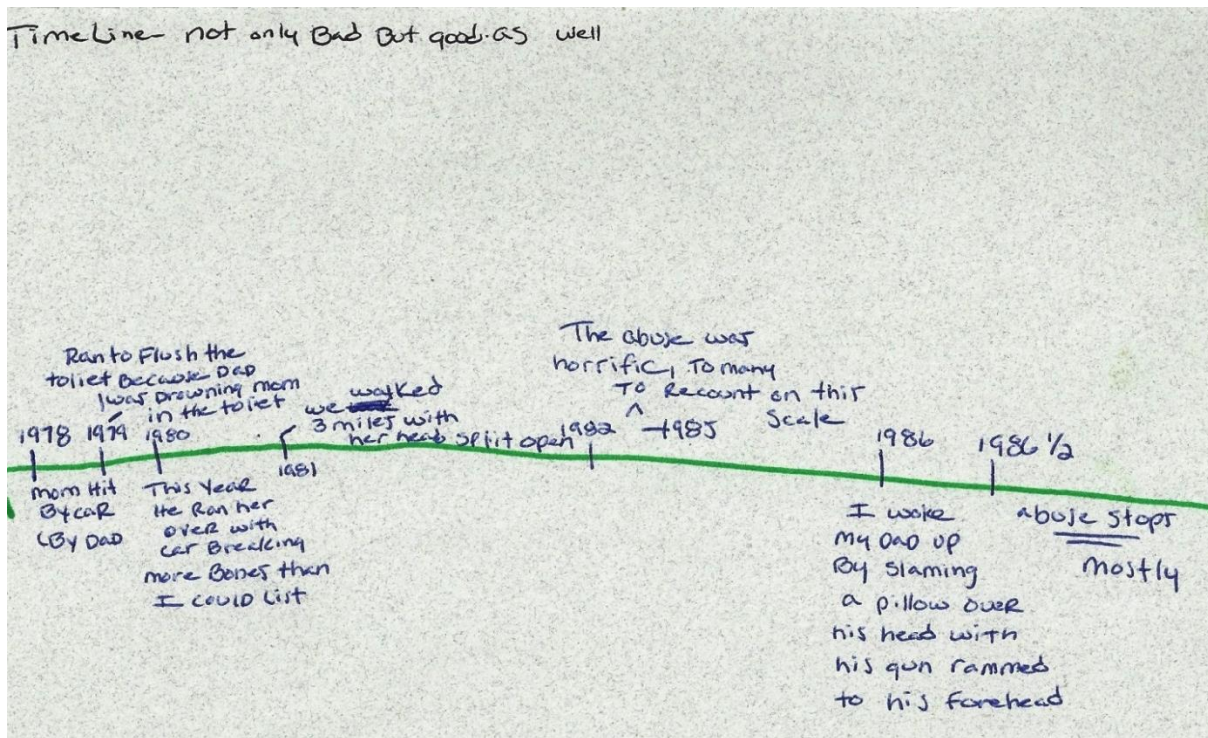


Figure 2. Zeke’s timeline

“Lisa?” Zeke asks. “Is this what you mean by a timeline?” He hands me a sheet of paper.

“Yes, Zeke,” I say. “This is exactly what I meant. You decide which moment you want to write about. Okay?”

“Yep.”

“Now that we’re done with that, let’s do an artistic project together,” I say.

Orion drops his pencil, “Damn, I’m no artist.”

I elaborate, “You do not need to be an artist. You can use words, shapes, or do your best to draw for this project. I’m handing you each a piece of thick paper, cardstock. Here you go, pass this down. Get out your markers. Okay, so here’s what we are doing. I’d like you to think about a prayer, a hope, or a gratitude you have, then write or draw it on the card.”

Orion asks, “You said we can just write?”

“Absolutely, however your prayer, hope, or gratitude comes out of you, let it hit the page. Let’s sit for a few minutes and work on this.”

As soon as I see them winding down, I say, “Okay, it seems like most of you are done. I’m going to ask if you’d like to share. Remember, you do not have to.”

Orion begins, “I don't even know if what I did was right. I just came up with whatever was in my head.”

I assure, “There's no right or wrong.”

Orion continues, “Sticks and stones are hard as bones. Aimed with an angry heart, words can sting like anything but silence is what hurts our hearts. James Chapter 3 tells us that our tongue is the most powerful weapon; it can bring great joy, love to others, but it can also hurt and destroy someone. So watch what you say and how you say it. If you can't say something nice,

don't say anything at all. Remember, once you say something you can't unsay it.”

“Right,” I say, “You can't. Awesome. I've heard the saying, ‘you are the master of your words until spoken then they become the master of you.’ So you can choose what words you're going to say, but the minute you've spoken them, you don't have control over how someone hears or interprets those words.”

Orion says, “There's no taking it back.”

Flynn laughs, “It's like a hamburger; it can never be steak again.”

I laugh, “That's right.”

Zeke says, “Mine is simple. I just wrote down a prayer that I say a lot, like ten times a day. Dear heavenly father, king of all kings, thank you for all your blessings, and for all of your love that you bring into my heart every day, in your son's name I pray, Amen.”

Zeke hands me his paper. I thank him and agree, “Amen, right? I'm going to put your name on the back of this. Is that okay with you?”

Marcus shares, “I prayed for more time, time to get my head right. Dear God, I want you in my life, I want you to take over all of me. I do not know what to do or what you want me to do. I want to be for you, doing your will and helping others, but I cannot do that if my life is not right with you. Help me dear God. I want your way so bad, tell me what to do.

“Thank you, Marcus.”

Flynn murmurs, “Mine says love and be loved. I'm not done with it yet.”

“That's okay, you can keep working on it,” I say. “Now I'll share with you guys what I did. I drew a flamingo and my eye crying. I'm coming up on the anniversary of the death of a very special person in my life. She was my mom's best friend from elementary school, so she was like an aunt to me and my sisters. Because she's gone, we lost that connection to the family,

her part of the family. None of us are making the same effort to stay connected as we did before.

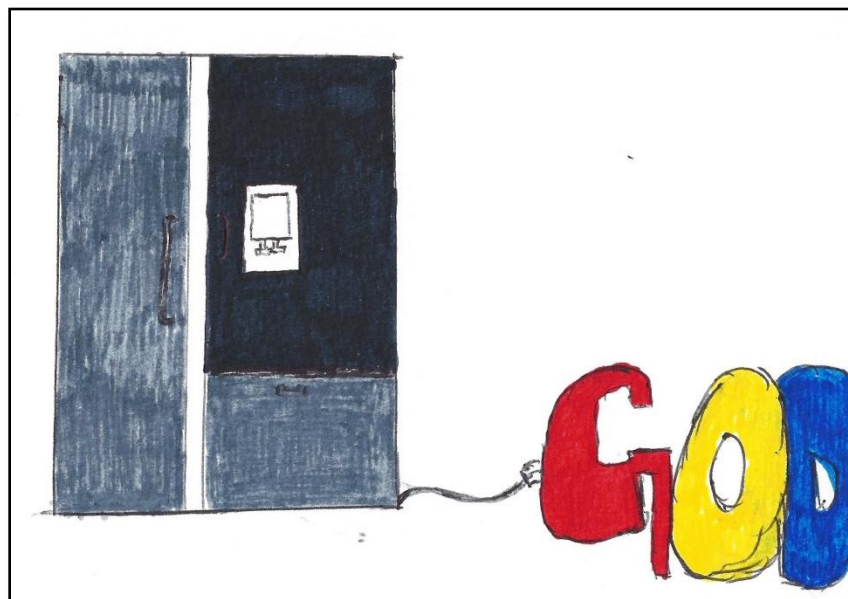
“I wrote, ‘I miss you and we are not the same without you,’ because we're not. So, Christmas, our Christmas tradition that we've had for almost 30 years is gone. It didn't happen this year, and even though both sides reached out, it just never happened. So, that's my prayer, I'm just putting it out there and maybe this year we will make something different happen.”

Voices console, “Sorry to hear that.”

“That's good stuff. Thanks for sharing.”

I accept their consolation, “Thank you, gentlemen. Who's next?”

Lathan offers, “I'll go next. Don't laugh.”



**Figure 3.** Lathan's drawing

Orion laughs. “Is that an icebox?” he asks, looking at the picture Lathan drew.

“Yes,” Lathan covers his mouth and laughs too.

Talon asks, “What's an icebox?”

Lathan explains, “A fridge. Listen. See how this fridge is plugged into God? I feel like



being here at the Sally, I am plugged into God, my power source. Being unplugged from God, all my insides got rotten and went bad. Being plugged into and connected to God, I can stay fresh and healthy. Now that I know what this feels like, I am hoping I stay plugged into my power source.”

“Wow. That’s awesome. I love it!” Flynn says.

Orion adds, “That’s really *cool*, man. Get it?”

Laughter fills the room.

I look at Talon who slumps in his chair before saying, “Yeah, I didn't put like a prayer or a poem. I'm not poetic.”

“That's fine.”

Talon proceeds, “I'm just hoping to gain more knowledge of myself and my disease so that I might better find myself and abilities to help others—my family, my kids and you know other alcoholics and addicts. Later I'll get to sponsor people. For now, I just pray for God's will daily so that I may know what my true purpose in life. I'm trying not to worry about things I worry about like a job, money, and stuff like that. It's nice to have it but I can't worry about it. I drew little pictures of me and my kids and my mom and my chunky dad.”

I assert, “That works. Awesome, thank you.”

Orion blurts out, “You are so talented to be able to draw a fat stick person.”

Laughter.

Brice shaking his head and laughing says, “Exactly. I tried to draw a picture but I couldn't do it very well, so I wrote my thoughts about my dog Fido and how I can't wait to see him. He has been one of the most positive things that's happened to me in the last few years. He's a rescue but since the day I've had him he has saved me more times than I can remember. Most of

the times he saved me, I was in no shape to remember what transpired.”

His voice grows soft and unsteady, “He greets me with complete abandon and adoration whether I've been gone ten minutes or ten hours. He has the gentlest heart...” Brice lets out an audible wail, bows his head, and cries.

Voices console, “It's alright buddy, it's all right pal, let it out.”

Brice continues to sob, “All he ever wanted was love. At times he'd be a stubborn pain but who couldn't be. He's the best dog I've ever known.”

Flynn repeats, “It's okay Brice; it's all right buddy.”

I look around the table in admiration of the group stepping up to console and comfort Brice and catch Arlo mouthing the word, “Pussy.” I shoot a disapproving glance and shake my head. I choose to not say anything out loud for fear of ruining the moment for others.

“The comfort that they give, bring, you know if a dog talked, I'm pretty sure he'd tell me a lot of things. They're like family. That brought back memories for me. Thanks,” Zeke says.

I nod, “Yes, thank you for being vulnerable with us.”

Brice snuffles.

Marcus shakes his head and huffs, “You put pain on us.”

I am caught off guard, “I'm sorry, what did you say?”

Marcus repeats, “You put pain on us. It goes deep, so deep, there's no space in between. I don't even know what to write. I can't even collect my feelings because anytime I step into a classroom, I'm given paper put to me about my feelings and I, and I'm losing the, I'm losing how I'm feeling, I need space in between.

“Every room I walk in, I like your class, but you come in and I gotta dig in my feelings again and I don't even, I don't even get a chance to think about. I don't, I don't want to write what

I think, I need to write how I really feel, and yet I'm pushed. I, I feel like I'm pushed to do this so I, you know, it's like, I just need time to, I've been through a hell of a lot, and I just can't pull it all out at one time. They give me six months, to a year, to collect things and this is like gosh, so you know. It's like a painful class; this is not a journaling class.

Lathan interjects, "That's the same, your thoughts and your feelings."

"But I need time, I need time, I've dealt with so many things, so many things and it's like I don't have time to sit down and collect how, how to even process and to feel, process things. I'm not given time to do it. With the other counselors and stuff it's spaced out. With you it's every week, and it's like, man I need a break. I need to see how I'm even feeling, you know?" Marcus is shaking his head and rubbing his hands together.

I advise, "Marcus, don't write then, don't write and just draw or color and if you, if this is too much, then it might be too much. This class might be too much. And you're the only one who can know that. And if it's too much, you make the call. Okay?"

"No, I'm going to do the work. I just wish it was spaced out, feelings this week and we need something else that week. I just don't want to deal with feelings every week."

Lathan assures him, "If every day you do a little bit..."

Marcus tries to explain, "I get it, I mean, I'm just saying, you are not understanding what I'm saying, because, of what I've been through as a child coming up and all of that, and I've lived in a shell, and because we were sharing that with the counselors, everything that's coming at me is about feelings, but, they space it out, they give me time to collect my feelings. Here, I'm getting it every week, I mean, I won't know how I am, I'm just, I just need, I don't want, I don't want to deal with feelings every week when I come in here."

Lathan grabs Marcus by the shoulder and says, "Not just negative feelings, you've got

other feelings. You can't find any good feelings? Write good feelings about what we're doing.”

Marcus concedes, “It might be a good class, I don't want to have to keep dealing with my feelings every time I walk in here. I can't handle it right now. I'm dealing with too much.”

I let him know, “It might be too much for you right now.”

“You gotta find something, you know what I mean, even in the storm, even in the rain, wherever we are, whatever we're going through, there's a little bit of hope somewhere. You just gotta find it,” Lathan points out.

“This is going to go deeper,” I warn Marcus. I cannot have him doing this because he thinks I want him here. He has to want it. He is the only one who can determine if the journaling and storytelling group can be of value to him.

Marcus is on a roll, “No matter what you do, no matter what you do, everything takes time. It's a process. See, you all don't know what I have to deal with within. Because of what I've been through and what the others are putting on me. You see what I'm saying. But they're working with me and they space it out, they are not throwing it at me every week, they're giving me time to collect my feelings. And then talk about it. When I do that, then I can sit down and then I can write because I know how I really feel. You know? And when I write here, I have to think in bits and pieces, but it's how I really feel, but I need time. I'm still searching for me. I don't even know who the hell I am. I don't know who I am. You know? I don't know.”

I touch his shoulder and nod, “I understand. What I would like for you to do is don't do anything this week. Think about whether or not to participate. This feels heavy but it's going to get heavier.”

Marcus half laughs, half sighs, “I'm pretty sure of that.”

I stress, “No, I'm telling you, I know, I wrote it, it's going to get heavier.”

Talon interrupts, "I've got to catch a van. Are we done?"

Caught off guard, I say, "Oh yes, thank you so much."

Marcus starts to gather his things and says, "Oh yeah, the van." He must see the worry and concern on my face, "I'm going to do the work; I'm going to do the work, I just..."

"I'm not worried about the work; I'm worried about your well-being."

He pauses at the door and pleads, "Don't tell Chris that I..."

I assure him, "I'm not going to, I'm not going to tell him anything." I ask for assurances myself, "Are you okay? You are leaving this room right now. I need to know you're okay."

He jogs to catch up with Talon, looks back and says, "I'm fine. I'm going to a meeting."

Tonight's session had some rough spots. Arlo is flat out refusing to participate, being vulgar, and ridiculing those who do. I look for him at the end of the meeting, but no luck. I have to figure out what I am going to do about his behavior. Brice admits to being a reluctant participant but participates nonetheless. His story of attempted suicide is heart-wrenching. Lathan seems to be devolving and references an identity crisis but he stepped up and played the role of a co-facilitator when it came to calming Marcus. Maybe Lathan has some mental health issues of which I am unaware. I know from past groups I've facilitated, some residents are getting back on medications while others are trying them for the first time. They struggle with restlessness, sleepiness, and irritability as they figure out the right doses.

I'm wondering if participating in group is too much for Marcus. I am encouraged by how he opens up and tells me how he's feeling (about feelings). His opening up in group is evidence he trusts me and the others enough to shoulder his doubts and worries as he processes his feelings. I'm worried Orion might be deflecting some buried hurt by the way he washes over everything with jokes and gets caught up in the details of what I am doing instead of focusing on

digging into his own stories. There are bright spots. I feel encouraged that Flynn wrote an unprompted story about his friend “the bottle” and shared it with the group. Brice showing vulnerability in front of the others when he talked about his dog was brave and powerful. Zeke tried free flowing writing and while it was difficult for him, he seems willing to try again.



**Figure 4.** Hope flag



**Figure 5.** Prayer flag

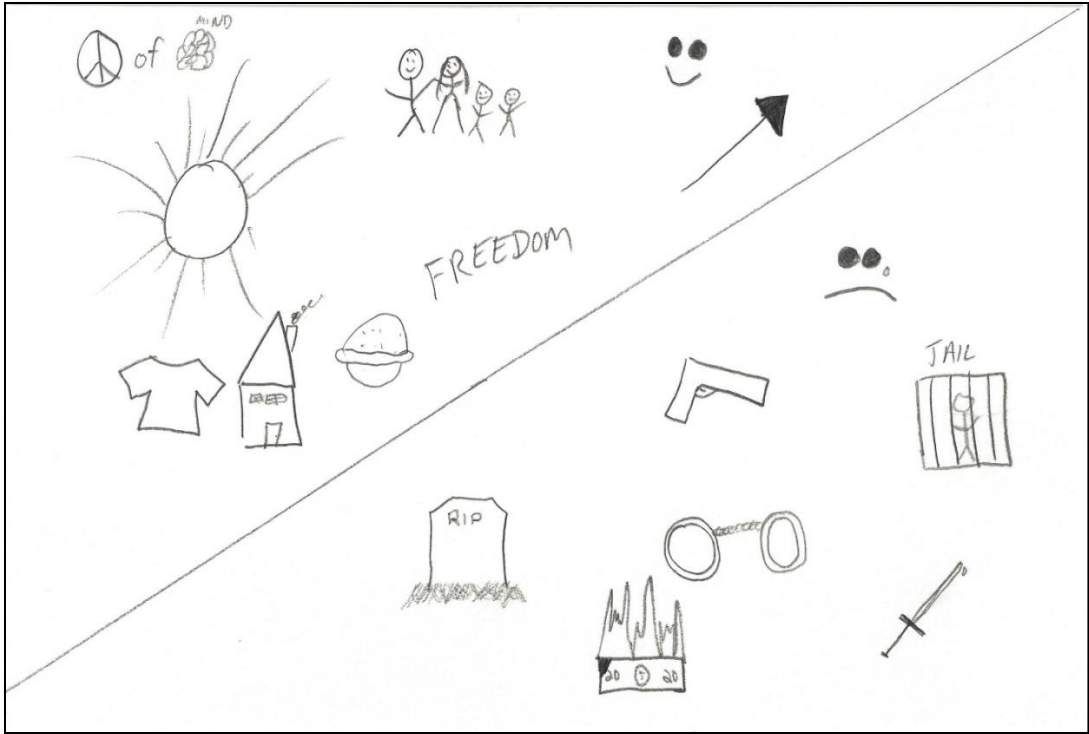


Figure 6. Prayer flag



Figure 7. Prayer flag

### **CHAPTER THREE:**

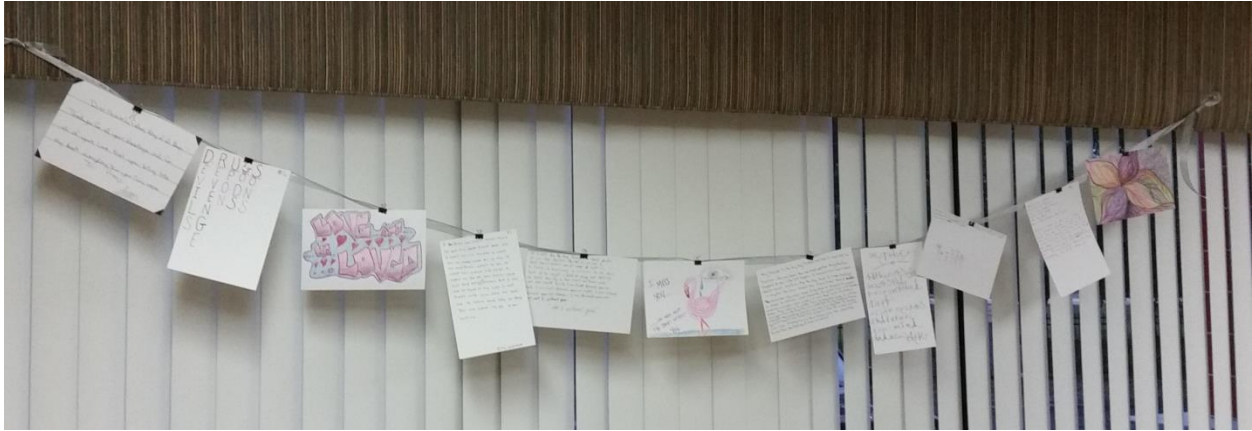
### **TURNING POINTS**

In preparation for tonight's group, I need to string together the prayer, hope, and gratitude cards the men created last week. I spread them out on my kitchen counter and affix them to a metallic silver ribbon with small binder clips. I know exactly how and where I'll display it when I arrive. Before packing up my bin, I change the batteries in my recorder. When I first started, the recorder stopped halfway through a meeting. Definitely not letting that happen again. I check my stash of chips and grab an unopened bag of twenty single serving packs. I print out this week's reflection sheets and stack everything by the door.

Hoping to catch Arlo before the meeting starts, I leave a little early. At first, I thought about removing him from group. Then it occurred to me, he may be the one who needs to be involved the most. I decide instead to have a conversation with him and point out what I found unacceptable, why it is unacceptable, and ask for his commitment to be kind to other participants. Upon arriving, I notice Arlo's name has been removed from the sign-in sheet. When I ask, I am told by Brice that he dropped out of group. I feel a sense of relief wash over me and only then realize just how much I was dreading the conversation.

I head into the conference room and find Marcus there clutching a bible in one hand and resting his head in the other. I move through the space quietly as to not disturb. I hang the ribbon with the prayer, hope, flags and head back to my seat.





**Figure 8.** Group's Hope, Prayer, and Gratitude Flags displayed

He glances up at me when I place my things on the table. He wipes away tears and tells me that his son killed himself a few days ago. I am at a loss for words and gulp back my own tears. I search his face. Can he handle being in this room today? I ask, “Do you want to be here?” He tells me he needs to be here with us. Several other men file into the room taking their place around the table. Marcus sits beside me, head bowed and resting on his clasped hands. I pat his shoulder then hold tight before letting go.

Life continues to happen to and impact the participants in real ways while they are here trying to get on their feet. I hadn't imagined the stories they'd tell would be happening in real time. How could I not *know* new stories would arise and demand to be told—of relationships forming and dissolving, of identities morphing, and of threats to health and well-being?

I feel a little shaken as I begin group, “So, here we are. First, I'd like to point out that Arlo is not here. He set a good example for all of us. He felt this class was not right for him and decided to spend his time elsewhere. He tried it, and it's just not for him. I wish him well.”

Flynn shrugs and says, “He never participated anyway. It was weird talking in front of a guy that never talked about anything.”

I nod and agree, “Sure. Without the reciprocity, it might be hard to trust him with your

stories since he wasn't willing to share his own. Thank you for pointing that out. Check out our work of art hanging over the window.”

“That’s cool,” Flynn says.

Orion seems bummed. “If I would have known you were going to hang it so everyone could see, I would have made it neater.”

“It’s for our eyes only. I’ll put it up and take it down each time we meet.” I assure.

“Oh, okay.”

I say, “Before I forget, here’s the sign in sheet. And guys, take just one bag of chips.”

“What if Talon wants to give me his bag of Funyuns?” Brice asks.

I laugh. “If he wants to give you his bag, that’s fine. Now that’s settled, I would like to start this group tonight talking about how last week finished if that's okay. Can we do that?”

Several voices respond, “Yeah. Yes.”

I continue, “In our last group, the feelings, emotions, it became like a hot topic at the tail end of our meeting. And, I know, well it seems that it could be very difficult to deal with some of the feelings that are going to come up. Not that it seems like it; it *is* difficult to deal with some of the feelings that are coming up. I just wanted to talk a little bit about feelings and emotions and ask you guys to talk about how you think emotions and maybe drugs and alcohol are interrelated. I'm just going to put this out there; think about it for a second. Upon check-in, I'd like your take on the ways that emotions and feelings are interrelated with drugs and alcohol.

“Talon, it looks like you want to start us off. Do your check-in and talk about the way you think emotions and feelings might be interrelated to drug and alcohol use.”

He begins, “Drugs and alcohol? The whole, sole purpose of drugs and alcohol is to suppress emotions and feelings. When I felt anything, it would directly lead me to wanting to

numb that feeling out. I couldn't handle that feeling because of my lack of maturity. My responsibilities seemed impossible to handle and I just wasn't fit to live life on life's terms. I didn't want to be a man. I didn't want to be an adult. I thought it sucks. I thought it was lame having to be responsible and pay bills and everything, so I knew what would get rid of that feeling for the time being and that was with drugs and alcohol, especially heroin. So when I did the drugs, I felt nothing. And, whenever those feelings would come back it would be more intensified so it would lead to more use because I didn't deal with them in the first place. I've been sober four months and it's by the grace of God that I'm still sober. But, I've gotta say, I've been thinking about drinking a lot lately. It's hard to shake the thirst."

I affirm, "Drugs and alcohol helped you suppress emotions and feelings. What do you do now when the urge to drink hits?"

"I try to keep busy or sleep."

"Do you talk to anyone about it?" I ask.

"I haven't yet."

"Dude, talk to your sponsor, that's what he's there for. He won't judge you," Flynn says.

"Sounds like that might be the way to go?" I ask.

He nods and I continue, "Thank you for being open with us. Who's next?"

Brice seems unsure, "Good evening, emotion, what was the question again?"

I clarify, "Just how you think feelings and emotions might tie into drug and alcohol use."

"Ah. Feelings and emotions, I believe that they directly relate to drugs and alcohol. How you're feeling? I started out experimenting with drugs to see how it made me feel, you know? I was always eccentric, always a touchy-feely guy, so I drifted towards ecstasy and acid. I just wanted to enhance that feeling, deepen that feeling, deepen that relationship with somebody. It

was always about the feelings, about enhancement of feelings in the beginning. Then it just came to a point where it started to bleed in. If I wanted to party, I got high. If I was feeling bad, I got high. If I was feeling sad, I got high. Frustrated, I got high. Instead of handling the feelings, drugs started to depress and oppress them. Eventually I was stuck with emotions I couldn't handle and couldn't deal with nor did I know how to deal with because it just got to the point where I didn't talk about them. You know?"

Others are nodding in agreement.

He continues, "I feel that it's very important to talk about how you're feeling, where you're at, and what you're going through. That was one of the things that me and my best friend did. If we were taking ecstasy or acid or whatever, we set up an environment to where that we could feel comfortable enough to talk, like how are you feeling and what's going through your mind, you know? What are you thinking about? It was always like bits and pieces of us zoning in and out. It was always about either enhancing the feelings or numbing the feelings."

"So it sounds like the new goal might be to build a network of people you can actually talk to without having to resort to using drugs. Try to enhance those feelings in natural ways, or, speak or talk them out to process them, right? Okay, thank you," I say.

"Thank you for understanding."

Flynn jumps in, "For me, I mean, most recently I would say I definitely drink to suppress thought more than emotions. I just didn't want to think about shit. But even with alcohol, I feel a flood of emotion, it's not numbing to me."

I encourage, "Mhmm..."

Flynn continues, "It's a different thing, if I'm doing it by myself it's different, and if I'm with people then I'm very outgoing and very extroverted. I've heard my whole life, this is my

umpteenth time in rehab, I always hear suppression of emotion but to me it's more thought, not emotion. I don't want to think about things. That's the way it's been as long as I can remember.”

I acknowledge, “Interesting, and the thing is, we always skip the thought part right? Because when you talk about suppressing emotion, it's like jumping over the thinking step because really it's the thoughts about what's happening that have an impact.”

“For me anyway.”

I add, “That leaves you feeling a certain way about your life, right? We skip the thought part and go straight to the let's just kill the emotion or let's increase an emotion, forgetting that it's the thoughts that lead us to feeling the emotion. But we can't skip the thought part because you don't just feel; you can't just feel without a thought in your head. Thank you for bringing that part to it. So far, I'm hearing different things. I'm hearing it could be chasing good feelings or you could be hiding from uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. At different points, there are ups and there are downs...”

“I think it's different for everybody,” Flynn says.

“Yes, I'm looking forward to seeing what the rest of you think. Okay, thank you.”

Zeke speaks. “I would say throughout the years, social anxiety was always a big thing for me. I tended to drink or use more when there were big events. In small groups I do well but if you put me in large groups, being a firefighter, I have hated every banquet I ever had to go to, I hated it. Usually it was social anxiety. I got clean after being discharged from the military. I was sober for over a year. One of my best friends asked me to be his best man at his wedding and I told him that I didn't want to be. I didn't want to be in the wedding because you're out there in front of everybody. I barely wanted to be in my own wedding much less somebody else's.”

Laughter fills the room.

Zeke smiles and continues, “Alcohol was commonplace for me in my life. My family had social gatherings with alcohol flowing freely. My senior year of high school, I don't even remember the last two weeks, I really don't. Once I knew my tests were done and I was going to graduate, I was on the porch with my uncles and friends of the family. I'd end up even on school nights drinking with adults out on the porch, you know?”

“I'm hearing a couple things here. You drank to deal with the discomfort of being around or in front of large groups. And family, the way we're raised can influence our behaviors.”

Zeke nods, “Yep. I have relatives on both sides of the family. There is a long line of alcoholism. I had one uncle who passed away a year or so ago. He was an alcoholic and he went to the programs and he, you know, he did good without drinking for a long time, but his kids and I we'd drink a lot together. Family does have a big effect on things.”

I say, “I'm sorry to hear about your uncle, Zeke. Thank you. Are you ready, Marcus?”

Zeke interjects, “Before Marcus gets started, I'd like to add to mine that even though I have a family history, I don't blame my family. I mean behaviors were condoned. That's the way things were, but it wasn't just our family, it was my hometown, and the times I lived through.”

I assure him, “Oh yeah, there's no blame, it's not about blame, I get it.”

Marcus, staring at his clasped hands, starts, “I am none of these today. Drinking, well it's not a choice thing to me. It was given to me from the age of three, so by the time I got to the point that it was a choice, it was too late; I was too far gone. It became a comforter to me, it became a protector, it wouldn't let anybody in or anybody hurt me, you know? I could depend on it because it really suppressed all my feelings and thoughts. But then it got to the point where drinking no longer protected the pain or the feelings, somehow the pain made its way through. And the drugs, I don't like drugs because it makes me paranoid, and some people may think it's

crazy, but I see things. I don't know what it means, but it wasn't pretty.”

“So drugs are not a comfort.”

“No,” he says, “they were never a comforter to me.”

“Or a support for you, it amplified the evil.”

Marcus continues, “Right, it actually, to me it made evil present itself and I didn't like that but alcohol, yeah, over sixty years of that stuff, and it really kept me in a shallow life. I didn't feel anything. It takes me back to my son who took his life. He was like that. He would hold his feelings in and never released them no matter what he was going through. He never talked about it. I never did neither, until this time around. That's why it's so hard you know? Having this stuff locked up in for so long?”

I validate, “You don't have the practice of letting it out, right? You don't have that practice or that experience.”

Marcus shakes his head, “Well, a lot of times I'm really trying to deal with it because now even more, I need to get it out. It's hard. I mean, damn I need to share my feelings with a stranger. I think in my mind what the hell is she going to do? Excuse me.”

I let him know I am not offended and encourage him to continue.

“What can you do with my feelings because a person can't really tell me something I haven't already thought about? I'm learning to take suggestions and listen and work with it, you know? I don't know what's going to work for me. I know that I work on getting better. That's my priority and now what happened with my son, it doesn't make me want to drink or do anything stupid, because to me that's not the solution. I take that and turn that into strength because I still have another son, my baby boy and two daughters, you know? To be strong, not just for myself but for them too and for their mother. Because they don't need that, as a matter of fact, being

honest, they have no idea of my drinking and drug problems. That's the God's truth, they've never been exposed to me drinking or drugging. You know what I'm saying? I didn't even smoke cigarettes in the house because my wife asked me not to.”

“That takes some willpower and that's some strong love too,” I nod. “I'd like to just address one of the things you said and if you guys don't mind for a second, you talked about what am I going to do about your feelings, right? And my hope is not that I'm going to...”

Marcus blurts out, “Not just you.”

I continue, “Anybody, but the hope is not that I can do something, because nobody can do anything about your feelings, you're right. You're the only one who knows your feelings and nobody can tell you anything different. But I can listen. And there is a kind of healing when somebody listens to you, when they're really listening. And when they are sharing that with you, you are telling a story and I'm going to listen to your story and you have a whole table full of people and we are all going to listen to your stories. We are going to support you through. The goal is for you to end up finding other people, people like us in your life as you move forward that you don't have to hide that crap from any more.”

Marcus chokes up a bit, “Well I'm learning to get it out and I'm really, honestly speaking, to me it really doesn't, it doesn't matter anymore because I've held it so long and you know, letting it out is a good thing because I feel like once I get it out I'm done with it. I'm done with it. I don't expect to, it's hard to get new feelings now for certain things, for certain people. I mean it just rips me apart about my son because I love the heck out of my kids and their mother but when it comes to my siblings, you know when I hear one of them died or my mother died I mean it's like, it's blank, there's nothing there. You know what I'm saying, there's nothing there, because there was never really nothing given there.”



I add, "You can't make it appear, right?"

"Right. No matter what I try to do, there's no feeling there, but it's different when it comes to my kids and their mother. And so I try to, like any other given time, something like this. Oh, I would have been," he chokes up. "I would have been gone."

I tell him, "I'm really glad you were here, in this environment, when it happened."

"Well, it's because I chose this time to take suggestions and listen and try things differently and believe it or not, it's actually helping and I also truly have a stronger desire and will not to drink or drug anymore. I want a life. You know, I want to live. I want to be in my kids' life. This only pushes me more to try to become closer to my kids. I don't want to die with my kids having animosity or bad feelings. I want to die having peace with my family, you know, because it's, it's not a good way to go. I need to have peace in my heart when I die."

I thank him for sharing and being vulnerable with us.

Lathan pats Marcus's shoulder before beginning, "Hello, my name is Lathan."

Marcus looks up and cheekily adds, "Diabetic."

We all laugh and I feel relief flood over me. While Marcus is dealing with so much, he still finds ways to connect and engage with others in group.

Lathan gets serious and adjusts himself in his seat, "Drugs and feelings, feelings and drugs, I guess, not that I'm the exception, but drugs didn't work as far as suppressing my feelings. My feelings didn't need to be suppressed; they needed to be expressed. I don't know. Somewhere a long time ago, during my childhood, I found a safe place in my mind. It was so far away from reality, so far away from where normal people interact with each other, that it was kind of hard to get back. I don't know. I guess it could be compared to like going in the woods, deep, deep in the woods, and just kind of like setting up camp, making yourself a shelter and whatnot but never

really venturing back out. I didn't know my way back.”

I ask, “Almost like you were lost in those woods and couldn’t find your way back?”

“Yes, but when I found drugs, it was kind of like a guide, I didn't need the forest, I didn't need the shelter, I didn't need to go so far within myself that I couldn't find my way back. It was awesome. I could express what was going on in my head without over-thinking or feeling like this wasn't the proper time or place. Because without the drugs, without the alcohol, it would just be speculation taking over me until the moment of relevance was gone. By the time I decided in my head that I was going to say something, or comment about this and that, the rest of the world had moved on with whatever was going on.”

“So it's like you had this big filter on and so you’re filtering everything and you're saying the drugs took the filter off and you could just express yourself freely?”

Lathan answers, “Yep. As soon as I took that drink or whatever substance it might be, I mean don't get me wrong, some substances have adverse effects where they intensify the whole need to go hide somewhere.”

I say, “Right. Your story falls in line with a couple of others’ stories about having social anxiety, like it helped people interact. For you, it made you feel more confident in what you were thinking about, where it helped Zeke be more confident in his dealings with others.”

Lathan nods, “Definitely.”

I thank him. Brice tells us he has felt the same way.

I look at Orion and say, “Your turn.”

He begins, “Okay, test subject number six. My siblings told me not too long ago, my older sister and brother, I guess they got together one of the Christmases and it was like, ‘you know you're the only one that is a pure alcoholic, I mean you drink and we were all wondering

what caused it.' My mom and dad were extremely strong alcoholics, and my sister said I was the only one out of all of us that was breastfed. I would cry when she would pull me off and they thought it was because I wanted more milk but they said looking back on it I must have already been addicted to the alcohol that was in her."

"Withdrawing, yeah, wow," voices chime in.

He laughs and continues, "When I was two instead of giving us a glass of ice water my mom had no problem giving us her beer and saying 'drink this if you're thirsty.' As time progressed, my parents passed away when I was extremely young and drinking may have helped me learn to deal with situations. Now I can go months without it, as long as things are going well, I don't need to drink, and I've never really been into drugs, I mean I've smoked a joint now and then, and I get high as a kite off of one hit. But long story short, I do know that as long as things are going well for me, my cycle of life. I can go months without touching alcohol, unless something throws a wrench in my woodwork per se, then yeah, I drink. Recently, my girl left me, kicked me out. I'm out on the streets and I'm homeless, whatever the case may be. When you turn to alcohol, unfortunately, instead of deadening and numbing the effects I'm already having, eventually you reach a point that now you are even intensifying the emotions you're already having. So why would I do that? I don't know. We are a crazy kind of a species."

I look around the room. They are connecting to the topic and each other. Marcus seems to be holding his own. I say, "Thanks guys. Thank you all for sharing."

Flynn points to the clock and says, "That was a long check-in."

I agree with him, "Yes, it took a long time but that's okay. I was going to come in here and tell you what I thought but I'm really glad that I went around the table first because from my understanding, you are either chasing a positive or a good feeling or you are running from a

negative uncomfortable feeling. Right? And in my mind it was very simple but you have all complexified this in great detail for me.”

Laughter fills the room.

I synthesize all they’ve said and repeat it back to them, “We’ve heard that it’s not just on the surface, you know, not an easy-peasy thing, it’s deep. We’ve got stories of children being exposed to alcohol at very young ages, we have stories of using as a coping tool for dealing with jobs, social situations, or how to process thoughts and get them out. Drugs and alcohol have served purposes in your lives, they have not always hindered, right, they have been of help, and that’s the Catch-22. The thing that you all are tasked with right now is finding a new way of doing this. Right? A new way of coping that is not detrimental to your life situation.

“We cannot escape thoughts, feelings, and emotions. There is no escape, they are always there. So we have to find ways of processing, of getting them out, of dealing with them in some way, and my hope is that you will end up finding what we do in here—art, journaling, storytelling, sharing with each other—to be productive ways of getting some of these things out so that you don’t feel burdened with them, so they are not weighing you down. Okay, let’s talk turning points. Did I already share with you all one of my turning point stories?”

A chorus of voices, “No.”

I take a deep breath and start my story, “Almost twenty years ago, I worked myself into the position of having terrible credit. I was barred from having a bank account. I was driving a car on the brink of repossession, working a part-time job making five dollars an hour, and the distraught mother of a five-year-old son and a six-month-old daughter. I had burned all bridges with my family and was on my own. Does this sound a bit like an addiction story to you?”

Various voices chimed around the table, “Yes, yes it does. It sounds very familiar.”

I continued, “I had nothing and nowhere to go. I felt humiliated and on the verge of giving up. My younger sister let me stay in her studio apartment with her for a few weeks but told me to find something quickly. I had about a hundred dollars to my name and was carrying what felt like a hundred pounds of shame. I found a remodeled duplex near East Bougainvillea and 15<sup>th</sup> that seemed way out of my price range, but took a chance. I asked the landlord if I could give him all I had that moment and if he’d trust me to make up the difference. I have no idea what made him say ‘yes,’ but he did. Hope sparked for me in that moment. A friend had just moved in with her boyfriend and had extra furniture and kitchen utensils she was willing to flat out give me. Each small victory was a sign God was looking out for me. I found a reasonable, loving daycare for my kids through word of mouth. Even though my part-time, five dollar an hour job was replaced with a full-time, eight dollar an hour job, money coming in was always less than the money going out. But somehow, we made it. Step by step, choice by choice, I moved forward and slowly rebuilt my life. It took years to win back my family.”

Flynn, looking bewildered, asks, “What on earth had you done to alienate your family?”

I hadn’t really thought about it from that perspective. “Good question,” I say and I take a few moments before continuing. “Well, I think that the root of it was that I had not followed their warnings and advice. I behaved in unpredictable and irrational ways. Again, no drugs involved. Looking back I might say that my addiction was love, a wild and futile search for acceptance and connection. I wasn’t whole. I was messed up from the way I was raised but couldn’t see how that impacted me and the choices I made. I dated men my parents did not approve of and the ultimate slight against my father was that I had a baby with a black man.”

Lathan leans back in his chair and asks sarcastically, “You mean your family abandoned you because of the men you dated and because you had a black baby?”

“That and I constantly switched up where I worked and where I lived. Each choice was like a punch in the gut to them. They were disappointed and angry. I still struggle with my relationships with my parents but my crawl from barely surviving to being stable, self-sufficient, and thriving took about five years and I’m happy to say, I’ve been able to keep it up. I got to the point where I was able to buy a home and a new car, maintain insurance for me and my kids, afford school clothes and summer trips, and be the kind of mother to them I knew I could be.”

Talon has tears in his eyes when he says, “You are giving me hope.”

“I’m glad. Thank you for listening to my story.”

Brice perks up and says, “It’s cool to know that people without drug and alcohol problems have issues too.”

I think about the stigma attached to being labelled an addict. I don’t say it out loud, but in comparison, I feel as though my climb back to being okay was easy in comparison to what they face. I just say, “I kept reminding myself that my situation was not permanent. I was working my way out of the hole I dug for myself and into a new life.”

Orion adds, “Nothing is forever.”

“Right,” I say, “Nothing is forever; it’s good to remember. Nothing is forever, not the good and not the bad. Okay, who’d like to share their turning point story?”

Lathan volunteers, “It’s kind of negative. I didn’t write it out, I’m just going to tell you the story off the top of my head. Not to get too into the details but there was a dice game and some guys got robbed the night before and I happened to be there. Just as a show of bravado, you return to the scene of the crime just to show everyone you’re not afraid. I get there and see the three guys that got robbed. So, I didn’t have long to think about it. I could run away. Inside that’s what my whole being is telling me because I was in the wrong, but at the same time, the only

thing I can wrap my mind around is how big I would be if I survived this encounter.

“Now that I'm sitting here, where I am now, a survivor of one, two, three, or more incidents like that, I don't see how I could have possibly thought anything different would have happened. Right through the crowd, bada-bing, bada-boom, pow, pow, pow. Suddenly, I'm lying on the ground and I am looking up at the sky and all I can think about is corny movies and how it's not like the movies and how this really hurts how my body feels hot and heavy and I can't move. Is this what dying feels like? Am I ready to die? What happens when I die?”

“I'm coming in and out of consciousness laying there and I'm only within earshot away from the same kids that if our positions were reversed I would have at that point died for them, hands down, at a moment's notice. I would have taken a bullet, fired shots. But not one person came to see what the noise was, who was firing a gun, and if memory serves correctly I was going to the store to get something for these guys. Nobody came to check and see where their stuff was or where I was. I just feel that if our positions were reversed, and I heard shots fired, and if somebody from my unit was gone, I'd go looking for them, but nobody came. I must have passed out...”

Stunned faces are all intently looking at Lathan. I can only imagine what my face is showing. I shake my head and say, “You were let down on several levels, by your surroundings, you felt like these people were there for you, but they weren't, and you thought you were invincible, and you weren't, so you were let down.”

He proceeds with his story, “I pride myself on being able to think my way through certain situations, but where was my thinking then? So, it's like, I'm crushed. Yes, I came to again a second time and it was dark.” He laughs.

I prod, “So you were still laying there?”

“Yes, there was snow accumulating on my chest. There were parts of my body that didn't have the bullets and I couldn't feel them. I'm starting to lose hope. The third time I wake up, I'm in the back of an ambulance, a cop sitting on my leg, he was putting pressure on it. After that, my whole life changed. I became like a loner. I mean I was always a loner, but it was, I really, really felt alone in the universe. I questioned whether or not anyone was out there. Is this all by chance? At the same time, the doctor was explaining to me, you know at that range in which I was shot and the caliber of the bullet, that me walking, and getting around as fast as I was and what not, it wasn't supposed to be possible.

“There was that five percent of supernatural, the part that you can't calculate. Why did that happen? All I know is after that, everything became black and white. There was a lot less gray area in my life, not that my life was a rainbow to begin with but the little bit of gray area I had was gone and my every move was a calculated step, and it was all about making sure that never happened to me again.”

“Man, that's some scary and amazing shit,” Flynn says.

I am in awe. Here is this man who thought he didn't belong, who thought he'd be wasting our time, telling a vivid and emotional story to a room of willing listeners. I tell him, “You are very good at expressing what's happening, and you ask some amazing questions. The thought of you lying there and asking yourself these questions and that you can remember these questions that you asked yourself amazes me.”

Flynn continues, “Very deep, very deep.”

“Thank you, Lathan, thank you for sharing that with us.”

I have not yet caught my breath when Orion speaks up, “Test subject number six. What's said in here stays in here, right? Do you know if there are cameras in this room?”



I look around the table and ask, “Everybody is cool with that, right? Remember, what gets said in here stays in here?”

Heads nod in agreement as we all search the corners of the conference room for signs we’re being recorded. “I don’t see anything. Do you?” I ask the room.

Orion takes a deep breath and continues, “No. Okay. Here goes. I’m glad you had us talk about this first because it helps explain my turning point I wrote about. I’m not going to read. I’ll just tell you all. I was in an extremely abusive childhood. My dad used to lock us in closets when I was young. He’d beat us and make us go days without food. If my mom would come in there and feed us, then she’d get a beating herself.

“If I loved my cat, my dad would kill it so that when I woke up I’d find my cat had been in my bed, dead. I accepted these things on a daily basis. My mother would tell me all the time, ‘You know this isn’t normal, right?’ I would answer, ‘That’s okay. I know Dad hates us all.’

“Well, eventually my dad killed my mom and then killed himself. They were both dead by the time I was ten. With that being said, I had never known a life per se. No one could take us in. Me and my little brother thought we were going to be put in an orphanage.

“But now for my turning point story—we were lucky enough to get put in a boy’s ranch, one that others had to pay to go to. We were assigned to a cottage with a married couple who had no kids of their own but took care of a bunch of us orphans. Me and another friend and my little brother were caught playing poker in a closet our very first night. I was terrified. I didn’t know how we’d be punished.

“We got a whooping, but right after, our new dad took us each on his knee and told us that he loved us, that he wanted good things for us, and expected us to follow the rules. This was the first time in my life I heard the words, ‘I love you.’ Had my parents lived, I would have never

known what it felt like to be loved. Quite frankly, my dad would have probably eventually killed every one of us, or vice versa.” He stops and looks at me as if to say, *okay, I’m done talking.*

I am caught off guard. This jokester façade *is* hiding a deep, dark past filled with hurt and trauma. “Orion, thank you for going deeper than I think you first intended. I think about your mom telling you how your situation was not normal. So many kids never get to know how they are being raised is not normal. She helped set you up to be open to this new family. Your story is incredible. Your strength to still be around is amazing. Thank you for sharing that with us all.”

The room is stunned into silence.

Flynn disrupts the quiet, “I’ll go next. I’m not going to read either. I don’t know that I’ve ever faced a near-death experience myself although I’ve been shot and stabbed. I’ll talk about the time I was stabbed by an ex-girlfriend’s stepdad at age seventeen. I lived in a small town and I remember that event was the talk of the town. Although I played the tough guy and pretended that it didn’t bother me, inside I was ashamed of my actions. I know that my ex-girlfriend went through some tough times too because of what I did.

“We both knew that we would never be able to be together in public again. But because we had deep feelings, we snuck around and saw each other anyway. I remember before his court date, my girl called and told me that if her stepdad went to jail, her mom and sister would lose everything. I knew the whole thing was my fault, so I asked the judge to dismiss his charges and he did. My drinking really picked up at this time. I was afraid of what people thought about me. Deep down I hated myself, but to my friends I played it up. I played the big shot, but my self-esteem was low and I was scared to death.

“I acted like it was no big deal at school but I was hurt. Had I not gone over to my girlfriend’s house trying to act all big and tough, I think she and I could have ended up together

forever. It was a sad time for us, having to act like we hated each other at school and sneak around to see each other. I struggled my whole life to make sense of what happened that day. I do know that had this not happened, I think my life would have turned out differently. I don't know how her stepdad feels about it, but after writing on this topic, I think I'd like to see if I can find him. I feel like he saved his family that day. I don't know what I would have done if I got in the house. He was just protecting his family. I would like a chance to make amends. It is the one day of my life I regret most."

Once the floodgates open, each participant becomes willing to share more and more, and dig deeper and deeper. I say, "That sounds terrifying. I am amazed that you are the one carrying the guilt for this. At seventeen, you are basically a kid and he was an adult. I have a question."

"Okay," he says.

"Did you really say that you don't feel like you've faced a near-death experience even though you've been shot at, actually shot, and stabbed? I am wondering what qualifies as near-death for you..."

Flynn laughs and says, "Well when you put it that way, I see your point. I just thought about it like I was getting my dues, I was getting what was coming to me."

"Thank you for sharing that story with us. I hope you find a way to forgive yourself."

He tightens his lips and says, "Yeah, I've shoved this story down so many times before. I've never told anyone how much this bothered me and how ashamed I am. I'm going to work with my sponsor to see if I can reach out and make amends for my actions.

"Keep us posted if you don't mind."

Flynn answers, "Will do."

"Okay, who wants to go next?"

Marcus starts to read, “Number one, coming up as a child was very hard. Not being loved by your mother or your father, being in the world by yourself, not knowing what to do or how to do it. I had no turning point at that time.

“Number two, middle life for me got harder. I am now way into drinking, not loving anyone, filled up with pain, searching for a way out, looking for a solution to what is going on inside of me, walking fear and wanting to just die, not letting anyone in, afraid to talk to anyone about my pain and fears.

“Number three, now I am full grown with lots of pain and problems. I'm learning to talk about my pain and fears. That is a big turning point for me. It's hard but I'm willing to try and see if talking will help me or not. I just want to move on with my life. I love my wife and kids very much and want to be in their lives. And, my wife and kids are willing to let me in. That is a blessing and a turning point for me.”

I tell him, “Oh, Marcus, thank you. I'd like to point out *that* your wife and kids are willing to stand beside you says you've given them reasons to. Somehow, without knowing love yourself, you found a way to give love to others. Amazing.”

Zeke shakes his papers toward me and asks, “Can I go next?”

“Sure!”

He reads, “I had smoked marijuana once or twice before, and wondered ‘what's the big attraction?’ Then I got a couple joints from my cousin. She brought them over to my friend's house and we went to his bedroom and smoked them. When we were done I started feeling it and feeling it strongly. Wow! This is what the big deal is! A religious experience if you will, it was mind-blowing. I was happy and knew I'd found something to do and do it I did.

“Before this time, I had always struggled to fit in. I was picked on, made fun of, and got

in lots of fights. Now suddenly I belong to a group with a common interest. Occasional use became daily use and it didn't stop for years, not even when I was in the military. I now see that day as the day I became an addict. My emotional and mental maturity was put on hold, selfish desires and the need to feel okay in my head took a priority over almost everything else. I have had a good time. Part of me says that I wouldn't trade any of my experiences because they are mine but I can't help thinking that it would have been nice to have had a chance.”

“Thank you. It seemed the need to fit in and to feel okay in your head became a priority. I am having a hard time seeing that as selfish. Maybe the way you went about it?” I ask.

“Yeah, maybe,” he answers.

I look around the table.

Talon shrugs and says, “I’ll go next. One turning point in my life that I often think about is going to college. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was seventeen-years-old and very anxious, excited. I grew up in the house of a recovering alcoholic, so I did not experiment with drugs or alcohol. I never missed a day of my three years of high school. I was an honor student, skinny, tall and very shy.

“When I got to community college, I was in this apartment with two other guys. Almost immediately I knew I had to drink a beer to fit in. I remember being a lightweight. There were parties every weekend. I was good in school so that was easy to keep up with. I noticed while playing ball that I was starting to hit home runs. I'd never been a power hitter. It became evident my body was maturing and filling out and with this the parties continued and my beer drinking tolerance went up.

“Then I tried pot. I was hooked. Still being a good student and playing good ball, I got a scholarship offer to go to a four-year college. Just like my first two years, drinking, smoking pot,

and partying were a big part of my life. I started to get into the heavier stuff. I was pulling off decent grades but there were incidents on campus where I almost got kicked out. These stories quickly got to the pro scouts and my hopes of playing professional ball were squashed. I didn't even finish my degree. I was heavy in my addiction and could not come out of it."

My heart sinks. He lives with the knowledge he might have gone pro had he not used. I am reminded of Freeman's (2009) idea of narrative foreclosure, the conviction there is no room to make new meanings, one's life or life work is done, or that the future is set in stone and offers nothing different from the past and present suffering. I say, "This sounds crushing. Like Flynn, I think of you in that moment as a kid. Seventeen to what, twenty-one, and in your hands was the trajectory of your entire future. And, I think of Zeke's story and how he ends with 'It would have been nice to have had a chance.' I am wondering if you feel like you are out of chances. I get having a dream of playing ball and if you measure success by having gotten into the pros, but can there be a new measurement of success for who you are today?"

"The degree you haven't finished. Does this mean you'll never finish it? I'm not sure you know this so I'll share. I was forty-two when I started school. I had taken a few classes twenty-five years earlier and had not done well. I was a forty-two year old woman starting at the beginning. And here I sit today, almost nine years later, working on a Ph.D. I think as long as we have will and motivation, we get to make our own chances over and over. I don't know. What do you all think?"

I don't tell them about the two times I enrolled as a kid, once at eighteen and another at nineteen, and how I threw those chances away. I was an A student who could have attended any college I wanted, followed any dream I wanted, but I couldn't settle the swirling thoughts in my head or the deal with emptiness in my chest. I had this deep, gaping, desperate hole in my heart,

no, in my soul, demanding to be fed. I couldn't figure out how to feed it and instead found ways to distract it and me with cross-country moves, creating chaos and havoc so I lived on the edge, and loving men who could not love me back. I once felt the same way, hopeless, helpless, and out of chances. One of my friends who met me at my worst frequently laughs and asks, "Who would have thought you of all people would be working on your doctorate degree?" I never know whether to thank her or feel offended.

I am snapped out of my thoughts and back into the room when Flynn smacks the table and says, "I had no idea you just recently started school. That's awesome. Makes me think that even at my age I have chances left inside of me."

Talon seems to perk up. "I see what you're saying. I've been seeing myself as a failure. Maybe I'll find a new goal to work toward once I have some sober time under my belt. It feels impossible though."

Lathan adds, "Especially for us guys with prison time. It's hard to get ahead. Not many people are willing to give guys like us chances."

"I can't imagine," I say. "Are there things you can look toward though? Do you learn of new trajectories for your lives through being here at The Salvation Army?"

"Sure. We have vocational rehab and other things available to us here," Orion says.

"That's good to know. Thank you all for explaining what it's like for you." I look at Brice who seems to be bursting at the seams. "Your turn," I say.

"I'm going to read what I wrote. We left my father when I was twelve. It had just started getting cold. The leaves wouldn't be any brighter than they were those first few weeks. Days would grow shorter, cool, and breezy. Evenings would give way to barren branches and frosted grass. The world around us prepared for the stillness and silence of winter. For us, life was to be

anything but still or silent.

“Unexplained bruises, friends who didn't want to come over anymore. Whatever the reason, my mother didn't need to explain herself, not to us. We were there for every Christmas fight, every vacation plan that fell through, every promise that was broken.

“The weekend we started packing felt like any other time we'd done the same. We picked up and put down roots enough already. I never let them grow too deep. But something felt different this time. I watched my dad sit at his computer, facing the corner while most of his life got boxed up and hauled away. We began and finished in one day. My dad stayed there, eyes searching the screen lit up blue in the dark, while the rest of us moved to a duplex across town.

“When we finished unpacking, I ran to the gas station down the road and came back with a bag of Cheetos. We sat on the floor in our sweat and exhaustion and I exhaled. I let go of a breath I'd held most of my life without realizing. I had less room to move but for the first time it felt like I had space to breathe.

“The most valuable lesson I learned from this time didn't make sense until I became an adult with mistakes and failures of my own. For years, my goal in life was to not be like my father. But I had become him. Eyes glued to a screen in a dark corner while my life moved on without me. If I define myself by who I don't want to be, I'll never really know who I am.”

Flynn smacks the table again, “Dude, that was amazing!”

“Yeah, man, I was glued to your story,” Lathan says.

I am rendered speechless. Brice takes on each assignment and gives it his all. I search for words. “Brice, this is beautiful. Thank you for sharing. And, it's so true. When we fight and work at not becoming someone or something, it's almost like that is exactly what we become. Where we focus is what we see and what we bring into our lives. Thank you.”



*Whew.* I regroup while thumbing through my file. I find what I'm looking for. "Okay, let me hand this out. It's one of my favorite reflection sheets, Scars and Tattoos. The explanation is short and quick. Think about the stories our bodies tell through scars or tattoos. Pick one, either a scar or tattoo, and write the story of how you got it. This does not have to be a sad or traumatic story and if you've already told us a story about a particular scar, Flynn..." I look his way.

Laughter fills the room.

I continue, "...then pick a different one to share. Any questions? Okay, so let's go around and take a couple seconds to just check out, okay? A quick check out so that the guys who have to leave at seven twenty-five or seven thirty can get out of here. I am going to check out first. I want to tell you guys that I am really, really appreciative of your involvement in this. I'm grateful for this opportunity and I want to thank you all for allowing yourselves to be vulnerable in this space and people who feel like sharing are sharing, you are sharing stories with us and, and it's amazing, I'm amazed. I just wanted to say thank you and I look forward to next week. That's my check out." I lean back in my chair, then sit right back up. I don't want to look exhausted.

Brice starts, "At first I was disappointed, but now, this week especially, I kind of like this class and I'm feeling that this is good for everybody in this room for one reason or another. It's different than all the other things we do at the Sally, which are all pretty much the same exact thing, no matter whether it's the twelve-step groups or Bible study. This is different and I think that's good. I'm liking it."

Flynn says, "It is different. It's making me think about things in different ways. I am excited to see where it goes. That's all for now."

I nod and don't pressure anyone to go next.

Zeke steps up. "I'm thankful for the group because it's another time to reflect, another

opportunity to be a part of a group of men, to let things out and try to understand our situations, try to be more open, honest.”

Orion leans in. “When I first got into this class, like Brice, it was a slight disappointment, I expected structure, and at first I thought, what the hell is this class? But, now, and I spoke to you about that today Lathan, I actually look forward to the class. I actually see everyone in here as an individual and because of their openness, I am learning and grasping the individualism in each person, and it’s an enjoyable learning experience. After I leave out of here in twelve weeks, I’m going to know Lathan better for it. I feel like we have a chance to be friends.”

“Nice,” I say. This seems like a big deal. I’ve noticed the spider web tattoo on Orion’s elbow. I think it has something to do with White pride. I make a note to look this up later.

Orion continues, “Also, thank you for all the supplies. Earlier I was talking to Lathan and I told him, I really like Lisa. You shared your stories with us last week. You’re not just a teacher, you’re part of the group and that’s a big plus when it comes to doing our groups. There’s always the teacher (he motions with his hand to show) up here, but you’re part of the project.”

“Thank you, Orion,” I say, remembering Behar’s (2014) notion of observing with vulnerability, connecting to the participants, and finding common ground with them through shared stories. I smile and feel satisfied. Orion acknowledged me as “participant observer.”

Talon speaks up. “I actually like our class. It’s definitely a break from the monotony. Everybody that’s talked, thank you, because anytime anybody speaks about a problem that they’re having, I experience strength and hope. Even the guy that comes in today helps me just as much as the guy that’s been sober for twenty years.”

“Good, thank you.”

Lathan says, “I guess I kind of wanted, since you guys started talking about how you felt

when you first came, I too had a misconception of what this was going to be about. I wouldn't say I was disappointed. I was just kind of confused at first, but this is right down my alley. It's been decades since I let the creative side of me actually create something. It's been awhile since I allotted myself time to play.

“When I got to the Sally, I switched to a whole kind of scholastic studies, no-nonsense recovery, kind of deal and I forgot that there's a side of me that never really knew how to relax and unwind. To the naked eye it may appear like we're just sitting around doodling, coloring, and having fun. But we're getting stuff done; we're approaching this from a very different angle. You're actually tricking us into getting to some issues that we wouldn't have tackled directly.”

My face heats up. I am thrilled at the response. “Neat,” I chirp.

He continues, “I feel like I'm getting a lot accomplished. I'm seeing it affect my work week too. I'm not so adamant about (he looks down at his wrist) okay, its four thirty, I have an hour to do this, or do that. If I hear a song I like, I can actually be in the moment and listen to the song. Once a door has been opened or a seed has been planted, if you feed it, it's going to grow. I think you planted a seed as far as like you know the beauty of life, because everything outside of here it's just work therapy. It's just black and white and gray. It's only when we get in here on Fridays that we get some color.

I choke up a bit. “Thank you so much Lathan.”

Lathan turns to Marcus, raises his eyebrows and smiles.

Marcus laughs. “Okay, I appreciate everything you're trying to do, okay? Because and don't get me wrong, and I do really believe you're trying to help us, and it's not the class, it's me. You're looking at a guy that's been closed up in the world for sixty something years, never did anything, never had interest in none of this, whatever,” and he motions to the markers and

mandala he started to work on.

He continues, “You know, I'm working on getting myself into it. I'm at the point now that even if I wasn't forced to come to this class, I want to be here, because I may get something out of it. Even with all that I'm dealing with, I get dumped on with death at my door. First I hear about my son, then I go to the doctor and they tell me they believe my cancer is coming back. This is why I'm having a problem with my breathing, and all of this. I'm learning to deal with the class. I'm even coloring and that's good for me.”

Laughter fills the room.

“And, sometimes I feel, I mean, just being honest, they say because if I don't get it out, I'm just putting stuff on stuff. I'm trying to get it out. Sometimes I feel I'm being pressured because it's all new to me. Then at times I think well, okay, this lady ain't got but twelve weeks, so she's trying to get all she can get out of us in twelve weeks. I think that, but I don't feel it's true, you know. I like everybody in here, and everybody makes the best of it. I'm just dealing with a lot right now.”

I agree with him, “You are dealing with a lot.”

“My plate runneth over with shit.”

Everyone laughs including Marcus.

I remind them, “If you ever feel like you don't want to talk in here, I want you to know that you can say I pass today. Do you know you have that option? You can do that.”

Marcus shakes his head and says, “If I do that, I might as well not be here.” After a long pause, he continues, “I may be the one to come through for you.”

My voice gets husky and deep. “You are doing great. I'm so impressed with you, because you come in here and you are eloquent, you put the words all together, and you express yourself

very well. It's fantastic and I really appreciate that, thank you.”

It's past seven thirty and some guys have already left to catch the van for another outside group. As the last few leave, voices call out, “See you next week; have a good night.”

“See you all next time.”

Walking to the other side of the room, I take a deep breath, unhook the ribbon with our cards attached from the window, and carefully pack it up. I stack the reflection sheets the guys have turned in and look forward to giving them a closer read. Hoping it doesn't show, my exhaustion leaves me to move more slowly than usual. When I get to the car, I do not start the engine or check my phone. Eyes closed, I sit in the dark and breathe.

Laub (1992) tells us there are hazards to listening as we bear witness to others sharing stories of trauma and loss. Hearing Marcus' story about his son forces me to acknowledge my greatest fear—my son making good on his voiced desire to end his own life. He suffers unspeakable emotional pain. I use the word *unspeakable* because he cannot find words to explain how or why he wants to die—only that he does. He wants to leave the world and escape this pain he cannot name. I go on the rollercoaster ride with him. He lets me into that part. He may not find the words to express why he feels the way he does or how he might find ways to feel better, but he knows he can always call and talk to me about how he's feeling.

I listen to him. I do not judge. I do not cry. I do not scream or try to reason with him or convince him to stay. I listen. I ask gentle questions like what's happening today that's different from yesterday and what might happen tomorrow that could make it okay to hang on for today. He feels safe when we talk. I strive to be a source of comfort and safety as he faces the world in which he feels imprisoned. His barbed wire fences are tangled, unintelligible razors of thoughts and memories strung together for which he can find no words to describe or express. I am

grateful he continues to try. Maybe through my witnessing, I am saving his life.

I don't know how I might make sense of my life if he followed through on the threats, how I'd story it, or find ways to move through it. It is unimaginable. Yet today I sat with a man who is journeying through this very pain while burdened with other life-altering struggles.

I wipe away tears, blink, and take a few deep breaths. Fifteen minutes have flown by. I finally feel able to drive away. I call a friend and ask if she's available to go sing karaoke with me. I need an outlet. Sometimes I feel guilty that after running groups, I find comfort and relief in sipping on a double-tall vodka and water while belting out Al Green's, *Let's Stay Together*.



**Figure 9.** Mandala a participant gave me

## **CHAPTER FOUR: SCARS AND TATTOOS**

The week has flown by and I have not done any prep work as of three o'clock this afternoon. I better get myself in gear. In this moment, I recognize my ability to separate from the pain and despair the participants share with me. They have to live in the stories they share; I get to put the stories away and choose when to think about them again. I dive in, reading and re-reading their reflection papers, asking questions in the margins, making comments to guide deeper exploration of the stories, and thanking each for the work they do. I think of Coles' (2014) work in this moment and wonder the stories they might tell if I were a man.

I have no idea what to expect this week as I pack up my supplies. I hope Marcus hangs in with us. He's strong and vulnerable and sets a good example for the others. Brice has been a great addition to group. His writing is wonderful. I'm really happy he stayed and is participating fully. I wonder if Orion will elaborate on his childhood trauma or will he continue to use humor and levity as he moves through his reflection assignments. Lathan has seemed a bit "off" lately; he has lucid, clear moments speckled with chaotic and confusing rants.

I arrive about twenty minutes early and wait near the conference room doors. A white, slight, thirty-something year old, moustached man approaches me and asks, "Hey. Are you the journaling lady?"

"Yes, I am. My name is Lisa."

"I'm Brad. So, what's the gist of...what goes on in your group? Is it just journaling?"

“Good to meet you Brad. Well, I teach participants a new way of journaling, the kind where you include thoughts and feelings and not write ‘this is what happened’ and ‘that's what happened.’ In group, I give the guys different prompts that they can use to write stories opening the door to telling stories maybe they've never told before. I share information that can help us face trauma and loss from the past and teach how to tell stories in new ways that helps us find our way to healing. Were you thinking about joining my class?”

He stares down and shuffles his feet, then says, “Yeah. I’ve got a lot of trauma in my life from when I was a kid. Me and my baby brother were beaten and so was my mom. We saw my mom raped repeatedly. The sounds she made, I’m sorry, I can’t get the sounds out of my head.”

“That sounds a lot like symptoms of PTSD,” I say.

“They tell me that’s what it is,” he continues. “You know, I was just a kid when the spirit of murder entered my heart.”

“Spirit of murder?” I ask. “Why do you think the spirit of murder entered your heart?”

“Well, my mom and her boyfriend tried to set up the landlord so they didn’t have to pay rent. My mom seduced him and had sex with him, and then my mom’s boyfriend walked in and tried to beat the crap out of the landlord but the landlord was stronger than he looked and he beat my mom’s boyfriend. I actually thought the landlord was going to kill him. I hoped he would.”

“Yikes, that sounds terrifying. You were there when this happened?”

He nods. “I was. My mom's boyfriend was such a bully and he used to beat me and my little brother. I was five. My brother was four. He would beat my mom too, rape her but I didn't know that it was a game to them. When I saw the landlord beating him up, it was the first time I thought maybe somebody could take him out. He had met his match. He had finally picked on the wrong guy. That was the first time I started thinking about killing him or hoping he died.”



“I cannot imagine being so little and living in fear like you did. It sounds like you just wanted to feel safe and that if he was gone, if he had been killed, maybe you and your little brother would have had a chance to feel safe. Is that what I'm hearing?”

His eyes get red and tear up. “Sure, if he was gone, we could have felt safe. I felt it was up to me though, I was the big brother. When I got a little older, I started thinking about how I could get even with him, kill him. I started fantasizing about taking out people who were hurting others, taking out people who were beating, raping and hurting others. That’s when the spirit of murder entered my heart.”

“I see what you’re saying. To me it sounds more like the spirit of revenge or vindication.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“Maybe you wanted to help save other people who felt afraid. Maybe you wanted to do for others what nobody was able to do for you?”

His eyebrows lift up and he leans in. “Yeah? Can you say more?”

“Maybe, instead of saying the spirit of murder came into your heart, maybe you can say the spirit of protection or vindication or even revenge came into your heart. What do you think?”

“I guess that's really what it was. I didn’t want to run around killing just anyone.”

I summarize what we’ve been talking about, “A kid who's been brutalized and beaten and is terrified, that's not murder that enters their heart, that's the need to feel safe and the hope that somebody will come and take the abuser away. He’s hoping maybe that the abuser will get a taste of his own medicine.”

“Yeah, that's a much better way to think about it.”

“And, that’s an example of what we do in group, Brad. You and I together reworked a story you’ve been telling yourself for a long time. That’s what can happen when we share stories

with other people. We have the chance to look at our stories through different eyes. If you'd never shared that story out loud with me, I couldn't have asked questions which helped you see yourself and your situation a little differently.”

“Cool, thanks for taking time to talk with me. If I'm still here next round, I'll sign up,” Brad says as my participants head toward me and the conference room. He shakes my hand and disappears around the corner. The guys and I head in and take our place around the table.

After my routine of checking that the door is closed, the sign-in sheet makes its way around the room. I say, “Okay, has everyone signed in? Here you go. Did you get your chips?”

Orion jokes as he digs through the snack bag, “I think next time I'm going to write about how much I love Cheetos.”

I laugh and say, “Right? Cheetos are so good. I cart that whole bag home with me and it takes everything in me to refrain.”

The sounds of participants ripping into the bags of chips, crunching, and soda cans popping, fill the room.

I stack and sort the papers I brought in. “Hey guys, can you believe we are already halfway through our sessions?”

“Nah, it's not possible,” Flynn says, “Time is flying.”

“Right? Okay, before we check in, I want to give you last week's reflection sheets back.”

Orion is energetic and speaks the moment I hand him his work, “Excellent, thank you, I'm subject number six. I'll use the Blob Tree for checking in today. I'm going to go outside the box here and I am the far-right, actually not even on the paper here.”

I ask, “You're not even on the paper? Okay, what does that mean?”

“Well, I'm kicking back in the sun. God gave me a wonderful day today and I'm just

watching my fellow man to see how they're reacting. I'm kicking back and just enjoying the peace and quiet and letting them do their thing."

"Very good," I say, "anything particular going on or it's just the way you feel today?"

"You know what? Every day is a holiday. They used to tell us in the Marines, 'every day's a holiday, every meal is a feast.' I think they lied to me back then." He laughs and the rest join in. "Now looking back, it is. I woke up. I'm happy. I've got great fellowship here, and work.

Not wanting to push further, I say, "Good, great, thank you."

"You're welcome ma'am."

Marcus, holding Plutchik's wheel, blurts out, "None of these fit me now."

The room is silent for what seems like five minutes before he continues, "I'm still filtering the death of my son. I'm not really at the point where I want to talk about that right now. We just buried the boy Saturday. I think about my wife, she's taking it hard and I keep checking on her, and her pain doesn't make mine any better. I've got to hold mine in and comfort her. I have to put mine on the side."

"That must be really hard," I say.

"Yeah, and then I got to check on the rest of my kids. They are so close. They were all born in the same month, you know."

"When birthdays come around, that is going to be a tough time for all of you," I add.

"Exactly. They have such a strong bond. To them it's like the rope is broken, the link is missing. The funeral was devastating. I had to put my feelings and emotions aside."

"You had to be the strong one..."

"Yeah, for him to die the way he died is even more devastating. No one saw it coming and then for my wife to come home and raise the garage and see her son dangling there."

I hear gasps from other participants and immediately think of Brice. How is he handling hearing about suicide from a different perspective, from the ones left behind? I am careful to not swivel my head and stare at him; instead, I maintain my focus on Marcus. “That is horrifying.”

He continues, “Then, for whatever reason, she waited around to see the boy go in the ground. That’s something you just don’t do. Nobody wants to see their loved one go in the ground, but she did it. They had to almost put her in the hospital. I have to keep myself on hold until she gets to a point where she accepts it.”

There’s another long pause before he says, “Now God’s got him, and he’s not suffering in the flesh anymore. I’m glad he made his peace with God before he went.” He nods indicating he’s done.

I thank him and turn toward Lathan who is coloring a mandala. He moves his hand and fingers against his neck (the sign for *cut off*) to tell me he passes. He seems out of sorts, down. I make a note to check on him after group.

Flynn is next. “I am peachy. I’m this guy sitting on the branch smiling and waving.”

Orion laughs and asks, “The branch where the fire is burning?”

“Yes. I feel like there’s always going to be a fire to put out and I can worry about the fire or I can choose to enjoy life and focus on the things that are good,” Flynn answers.

“Good answer,” Brice says before beginning his check-in, “I’m this guy out on the top limb dragging three guys behind him. It’s kinda risky being that high up, teetering on the edge, pushing boundaries.”

“Have you been setting examples for others, feeling like you’re pulling others along?”

Brice lights up, “Yes, thank you. That’s exactly it.”

I glance at Talon and ask if he’s ready to check in.

“Yep, not much has changed. I’m feeling serene, peaceful, and faithful. I feel like God’s got me and with his help I’m going to be successful. Though, I’m still thinking about drinking. I talked it over with my sponsor. He said it’s normal to go through craving. I don’t want to be one of these guys still struggling in their fifties. No offense,” Talon says as he looks toward Flynn.

“Hey none taken, man. I wish I would have been able to beat this when I was in my twenties. If you want it bad enough, you’ll get it,” Flynn says and leans back in his chair.

“Last but not least,” I say and turn to Zeke.

“I’m going to use the wheel. Today, I’m hopeful, aware, and trusting,” he answers.

“Oh, yeah? Any special reason?” I ask.

“Well, I got to see my wife and kid over the weekend. It feels like I finally have a chance at living a normal life. I took care of some things that needed fixing around the house, drove my daughter to karate practice, and my wife and I didn’t fight, not once. I feel like I’m getting the hang of this sober thing.”

“That’s awesome,” I say. “Just a few weeks ago you felt like you didn’t want to come back after your weekend away.”

“Yeah, this place is helping me feel stronger. I need to remember why I am here and keep working the steps and talking to my sponsor,” Zeke says.

“Good, good,” I say.

“I don’t know that I’m going to stay the full six months though.”

“Oh, why not?” I ask.

“It feels monotonous. It’s the same thing, day in, day out. I want to be home with my family. I don’t get the point of having to be here six whole months.”

“Hmm, I wonder if you can look at it like a sport, like football or basketball.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“Well, I think of pro-ballplayers. They know what they’re doing but they still practice, over and over. They practice all the time, even in the off season, they spend time working on being strong and ready to play. What if you think about sticking around, doing the same thing over and over, as practice for being out there, for being strong when you’re on the outside?”

“I guess I could try that. I’ve never thought about it like that,” he says.

I am impressed with my analogy. I have no idea how I thought of it so quickly. No time for self-indulgent congratulations though. “Okay, gentlemen, we are going to do something a little different today,” I say and hand out copies of *The Road Not Taken* (Appendix A2(f)).

“Oh, I like Robert Frost,” Orion says, “now we’re talking.”

I ask for volunteers to read one stanza at a time. Orion starts us off.

Marcus interrupts, “Is this a poem? I never did any of this in my life.”

“Yes,” I answer, “this is a poem.”

He balks, “I don’t know about all of you, but I know nothing about poetry. I’m not understanding a damn word of that.”

I try not to panic. “Let’s just read through it once and see what we can get out of it.”

Stanza by stanza, the participants volunteer to read through the poem. When they’re done, I read through it another time in its entirety. “Okay, what does this poem leave you thinking about or feeling?” I ask.

Brice answers, “No matter what you choose, you get something out of life.”

“Oh, nice,” I say, “what else?”

Marcus asks, “What is the path less traveled by?”

Lathan speaks up for the first time tonight, “The hard road, uphill, and rocky maybe.”

“Sure, the harder path; the one fewer people might try out,” I add. “Any other thoughts?”

Flynn says, “I like how it says ‘way leads onto way’ like we think we can come back to an opportunity we had but didn’t choose; we really can’t. That exact path is never available to us again. We have to make new choices from where we are now.”

“Wow, yes, good call,” I say. “Way leads onto way, even though we imagine we can go back and try the path we didn’t take, we know there’s no way to really go back and choose the other path instead. We are never the same person we are when first presented with that choice, and that choice will never present itself to us in the same way twice. I like your take on it.”

Talon says, “He sounds like a loner.”

“Yes, it does sound like he’s alone when he’s making this choice.”

“I’m still not getting it,” Marcus says. “What are we supposed to do?”

“I have not said yet. I’ll walk you through it now. I’d like you all to take a few minutes to reflect. On this paper, write two to four lines or sentences about either making a choice or taking a path. It can be personal and specific. Your parents, best friend, peers might guide you and highlight a possible path. It’s not necessarily about mistakes or regrets, but instead about choices we made and where we might be today as a result.”

I look around the table and most seem to be struggling with my directions.

“I’m going to read it one more time. Read along with me, or close your eyes and listen.”

I read through again and say, “What does this make you think of? How might what I just read relate to your lives, your choices? We cannot know exactly where we would be if we chose a different way. What choices were made to lead you here today? What might we do differently moving forward? Were there signs we can pay attention to next time? Does that help?”

Orion is quick to answer, “Yep.”

Marcus asks, “What are we doing?”

“You are going to write 2 to 4 lines. What does this poem leave you thinking about? It can be specific or broad. No pressure; relax and let it flow.”

He shakes his head, laughs, and says, “Oh Lord, I am not this creative.”

I look around and all are focused on the paper in front of them. I start working on my lines. When I see a couple still struggling, I say, “Every choice makes a difference, no choice is without consequence, every choice matters,” then return to my paper.

A few minutes pass and those who are done start chatting. I wonder if those still thinking and working are interrupted by the talk. Do I say something and hush them or do I allow this to self-manage? I decide to leave it alone. If anyone is bothered, he will speak up.

Brice asks, “Are we going to have to read these out loud?”

“No, we won’t read them out loud right now. What I am going to do is collect your lines and put them together as one poem. It will be our response to Robert Frost’s *The Road Not Taken*. When you’re done, put your participant number at the top and pass them to me.”

“What are you going to do with these?” Marcus asks.

“I’m going to use the sentences, ideas, lines you all came up with to make one big poem, our poem. I’ll type it up and give it out to you next week. You are a poet after all, Marcus.”

Laughter fills the room.

“Neat,” Flynn says, “I can’t wait to see how it turns out.”

“I wish we had some extra time,” Brice sighs.

“I can give it back to you to work on now if you’d like.”

“Nah, it’ll be alright,” he says.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” I say. “Okay, let’s talk about scars and tattoos.”



I'll share my tattoo story with you."

"You have a tattoo?" Flynn asks.

"Yes, one, and I was forty-six when I got it."

I hear some laughter.

"I have two kids, both in their twenties. When my son was sixteen he asked if he could get a tattoo. I told him he'd have to wait until he turned eighteen. I could not be responsible for putting something on his body he'd have to live with for the rest of his life. He was upset with me. He said if I didn't let him have this one, he'd cover himself in tattoos when he turned eighteen. I stood my ground and said when he turned eighteen he could do whatever he wanted.

"Five years later, my daughter turned sixteen and asked for a tattoo. I told her the same thing I told her brother, 'When you're eighteen, you can do whatever you want with your body.' She seemed satisfied with my answer. But at seventeen she came to me again and asked, 'Mom, what if we get matching tattoos, you and me?'"

I pause then continue, "She was pretty slick, right?"

The guys laugh. "She got you good," Flynn says.

"Yes, she did. I asked what her idea was for a matching tattoo. She said she wanted something that incorporated the sun, moon, and stars because it reminded her of her childhood. I was stunned. She wanted to be reminded of childhood. She definitely had me. We asked my son if he wanted in on it. He said there was nothing he could think of that he'd want on his body forever. Oh, by the way, he's twenty-seven and does not have one single tattoo."

"Really?" asks Orion, "I bet it feels good to know you made the right decision."

"It sure does." I laugh then continue, "While he did not want a tattoo, he offered to design ours for us. My daughter and I went and had it done at the same time. Actually, she made me go

first to see how much it would hurt.”

Laughter fills the room.

I pull the back of my collar down to show off my tattoo, a lightly shaded gray-tone sun with teal star and purple half-moon inlays. “We have the same design in the same place.”

“It’s beautiful,” Brice says.

“Thank you. Oh, side note, she’s twenty-two and has a full sleeve now.”

Hearty laughter breaks out.

“Alright, let’s hear your tattoo and scar stories.”

Brice has his paper poised in his hands so I ask if he wants to start us off.

“Sure, well, scars. Most of my life, growing up there was an onslaught of beatings which put too many scars on my body to count. I can’t really remember them all. Instead, I’m going to talk about the scars that can’t be seen but are felt. The scars on my heart. Scars on the heart can’t just be stitched up like all the other ones. These scars have gone so deep and are so painful they have to be mended back together from within and taken away with love and compassion.”

“Wow, Brice. Short and simple and beautiful. Thank you so much,” I say.

Flynn starts, “I’ll go next. It’s a good one. I’ve got a scar on my right upper eyebrow. I got it in the tenth grade playing football. I was the hero that night. The first play of the game, I returned a kickoff, ninety yards for a touchdown. I also played defense, so after that I took over the cornerback position. During the opposing team’s drive, I helped out on a tackle and their running back sucker punched me right through my face mask and busted my skin open. I had blood all over my face. I ended up having to leave the game. I didn’t want to, but the rules said I had to get it stitched up. I really lived for sports as a kid. I remember it like it was yesterday—the marching band, the lights, the crowd, the smell of the concession stand, the smell of the grass,

the cheerleaders, the adrenaline, and the trip to the hospital in the ambulance. That's the story of just one of my scars. I picked a fun story, not one where I got shot or stabbed." He laughs.

"Thanks for sharing, Flynn," I say.

Lathan speaks up, "I didn't write anything but, like Brice, I'm going to talk about a scar no one can see. I'm the only one who knows it's there. Every day of my life, I look in the mirror and I see it every time. I feel it when I lay down to sleep. The most important thing about this scar is it reminds me of what I lost. It's my guilt eating me up inside. I don't blame God for taking my best friend, I blame myself, I should have tried to save him. That is my scar."

"Oh, Lathan, I am sorry you are carrying that burden. I don't know if we've heard this story yet from you."

"Nah, I went to visit him at his apartment before checking myself into the Sally. I could tell things weren't right but I had to worry about myself and my sobriety. I should have said something to him though. Maybe tried to get him to come here with me. I found out two months ago that he OD'd. I carry it like it's my fault."

"I don't know. I think about the stories you all tell in here. Is there anything anyone could have said or done to stop you from heading down the path you were on, stopped you from drinking or using? I'm not telling you how to feel, just pointing out that we each make our own choices, and make changes when we are ready. I am so sorry you are missing your friend."

"I know you're right, but maybe there was something I could have done. Being in here makes me feel like I am abandoning my friends out there," he says.

"Thank you for sharing that Lathan."

He nods and goes back to coloring the mandala he's been working on since he arrived.

“I guess I’ll go,” Marcus says. “The scar on my stomach reminds me when I had a feeding tube I had to have after going through radiation for my cancer. It was in me for a few weeks. I tried putting vodka in the plunger thing to see what would happen. I felt warm and relaxed right away. I had to be careful because I didn’t want my wife or kids to see what I was doing. I held off going to get the tube removed because I could get drunk without my breath smelling or my throat burning. When they finally pulled it out, it took some time but it healed over okay. I look at it today and it reminds me of the victory I had over cancer but how I still found a way to feed this terrible disease.”

“Geez, man, I would have never thought of that,” Flynn says.

Zeke grunts, “You’d be surprised what you do when you need to.”

“Thanks for sharing, Marcus,” I say.

“I didn’t write anything; I couldn’t focus on just one thing,” Orion says. “I have a bunch of scars. This one in my scalp is from getting hit with a tire iron by some rich guy in a BMW at a Taco Bell drive through. I’ve got this burn mark on my arm from when a friend dared me to put a cigarette out on my skin. I dared him back and we both have the same scar now.” He laughs then continues, “I’ve got my last name and date of birth on my rib cage just in case the day comes or in the event I am dismembered so they can still identify me.”

Bewildered looks fly around the room accompanied by whistles and gasps.

“Yep,” Zeke says, “it helps in emergency situations. In the military and as an EMT and firefighter, I’ve seen a few people who were unidentifiable.”

After a few moments of bewildered silence, Talon jokes, “I’m going to bring the mood up a bit with my tattoo story.”

“Okay, let’s hear it,” I say.

“Well, last week I got a cross and my last name tattooed on my chest. I wanted this to symbolize I am a child of God. To remind me of who I am and to stay on a path my family and kids would be proud of. A few months ago my family thought I was gone, done; today they know I am alive, enjoying life and enjoying who I am becoming, with the help of Jesus Christ.”

“Awesome, thanks for sharing,” Orion mimics me and the group laughs.

Zeke clears his throat and reads, “Like everybody else in here, I have a bunch of scars, all over my body. But none of the scars hold as much emotion as the burns on my right thumb. They came from a deep, full-thickness burn as a result of fire. It took weeks to heal. I got these scars from smoking crack, a result of holding my lighter so long that my skin blistered and burnt off.

“I was so ashamed of these scars when I got here, but there was something liberating in telling others the truth. I am amazed at the power of that drug and how it will override any sense of self-preservation or instinct to not harm ourselves. Even after having the burn, I continued to smoke crack causing more burns until they enveloped my entire thumb. Amazingly, when my thumb healed, my fingerprints grew back. A sign that is what used to identify and distinguish me from others, the real me, still exists and is restored after what appears to be total devastation.”

“Wow, Zeke, thank you so much for sharing that with us,” I say.

“Yep, I’ve got to get used to telling people about what I’ve been keeping buried inside me. Secrets kill us slowly from the inside.”

“Yes, they do,” I say.

Orion interrupts, “Why did you pick this topic for your Ph.D. project, journaling? Was it suggested to you? Did people pick other topics and you were left with this one?”

I love that he’s interested and wants to know more. “I’ve always appreciated the way writing poems and journaling has helped me move through painful moments in my life. I was

doing grief groups with incarcerated adolescents and thought about how having a workbook would make it easier for them to keep all their work in one place. Also, I was studying the fact that storytelling is healing. I decided to combine everything together into a curriculum and start a journaling and storytelling group for healing. And, here we are. I hope to go back into the youth prison system and run a group similar to what we are doing together. You all will play a part in making this a doable long-term project, something that gives back, something that will impact and make a difference in the lives of adolescents and their struggles with pain and addiction.”

“Wow, that’s awesome,” Flynn says.

Orion seems satisfied, nods, and leans back in his chair.

As I start to pull out next week’s reflection papers, the door opens and closes. This is not unusual as people often peek in, realize the room is occupied, then quietly close the door.

I hear a participant say, “Closed group,” as a man dressed in The Salvation Army uniform continues to walk into the room. Nervous glances dart around the table.

*Shit, I have to speak up.* “Hello, sir,” I say as he pulls up a chair and sits behind Orion.

“Hello,” he says.

“How's it going? Are you observing us or something?” I ask.

“Yes, can I please?” he responds.

“Well, it's up to the gentlemen in the room. This is supposed to be a closed group.”

“Oh, I didn't realize, I’m sorry. I thought he was kidding.”

“No. It's up to them and if they agree you are more than welcome to stay.”

Voices fill the space, “Well, I vote yes.”

“I'm cool with it.”

“I vote yes too.”

“Okay then,” I say, “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“I’m Major Joe.”

“My name is Lisa. Welcome Major Joe. Okay, let’s move on to what we are doing next, this week's reflection sheet is on regret.”

I am nervous. I hope it doesn’t show. Of course, it can’t help but show. *Breathe, Lisa.*

“Before we move on, I'd like to hand out something I found online. I went and looked up some things online, and I'm going to hand these out. Take one and pass it around. What I did is, I looked online for a few different things. The first part of this, this part is taken from...”

*Get your act together, Lisa.*

“Can somebody hand Joe a copy please? Okay, in the first section, they did a survey of people dying in hospice. They asked what they regretted most in their lives,” I say.

Flynn interjects, “Wow, that's pretty intense.”

I wonder if the guys are nervous too.

I continue, “They compiled the top five top regrets; number one, I wish I hadn't worked so hard. You know nine-to-fivers, or seven-to-seveners, you know what I'm saying, when work becomes the *it* and there's nothing else to enjoy. Number two, I wish I would have stayed in touch with my friends; number three, I wish I would have let myself be happier; number four, I wish I had the courage to express my true self; and finally, I wish I lived a life true to my dreams instead of what others expected of me.”

Zeke lets out a long sigh and says, “That's a rough one.”

“That *is* a rough one. I think it's really interesting to learn what the top five regrets of people at the end of their lives might say. We can question ourselves, are we living a life based on somebody else's expectations? I know I have,” I share.

Zeke nods. "That's the problem for the last 15 years of my life. I have regretted giving up a part of myself. I'm still angry about this."

*I feel like I'm talking too much, but I cannot help myself.* "Let's go through more. I wish I hadn't worked so hard, and what I see is that I never allowed myself to smell the roses or see the beauty in life, right? I focus so much on earning a dollar or providing, that I forgot to live. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends. Again, I think that even goes back to working too much or focusing too much on things that aren't related to other people, right? We find strength here (I motion around the room) in connecting to other people. What do you think?" I ask.

Silence. *Yes, they are impacted by an outsider's presence, just as I am.*

I offer, "When you go through similar things, or you want to know how somebody did something or survived a certain scenario, it's good to have others to talk with and to connect to. The next one, I wish I would have let myself be happier. I don't know, somehow these regrets all connect to each other for me. There's an absence, there's a regret of not enjoying the good things life has to offer. I thought this was really important to share with you."

I stop and give a moment to breathe or speak up if someone wants to.

Silence.

"Okay, you've all heard of post-traumatic stress, right? And I would bet each of us in this room is currently dealing with or has experienced it."

"Me." *Who said this?* I cannot tell.

"Well, there's a flip side to being in a post-traumatic state. It's called post-traumatic growth. People who live a normal, easy, and uneventful life never get challenged or need to question how they're living. We all just did the activity based on turning points and told stories about events that may have jarred us to the point of re-evaluating our lives and questioning what



we could do differently. I told you my story about facing surgery, and thinking that if I died in that moment, the shame and guilt I felt knowing that I was leaving a legacy for my children that I would not have been proud of. That moment gave me time to reevaluate.”

They are all intently watching me, silently. I cannot tell if they are afraid to talk because Joe, the Major, is in the room; maybe the space no longer feels safe. I’ll do my best to continue to impart knowledge, filling the silence. Maybe they’ll follow my lead and join in.

I say, “Had I never been in that moment, that trauma, I would have never reevaluated my life. I could have coasted along, for much longer. Here are four pages I printed out to share with you about post-traumatic growth. Please pass this handout along (Appendix A4(e)). Post-traumatic growth is a real thing. As people who have experienced trauma, we have a chance to revisit the way we are living our lives. I’ve included the links in the event you’d like to look these up for yourself. There is a long history of the study of post-traumatic growth, and it goes back to ancient times, early ideas in ancient Hebrews, Greeks, Christians, and the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and the Baha’i faith. Can you relate to what I’m saying?”

A disembodied voice says, “Absolutely.” Again, I do not see who said it.

I elaborate, “This is the storytelling we talked about. We can continue to write a story in a way that writes us as a victim, because initially, we are the victim in our trauma story, but then as we rewrite and reframe that story we can write ourselves as survivors, even victors. We can write the story with different eyes, new eyes, and see the potential for growth in ourselves, in our new stories. That is part of what I am doing in here, what we are doing together. We’ll read through some now, together. Please turn to the third page, causes and characteristics.”

I start reading, “Causes. Posttraumatic growth occurs with the attempts to adapt to highly negative sets of circumstances. Growth does not occur as a direct result of trauma, rather it is the

individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which posttraumatic growth occurs. Encouragingly, reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders.”

I look up and say, “Nobody sits around and says to you, ‘so tell me the good that came out of your devastating story,’ right? Because usually the people who have had good come out of it, they're off doing something fabulous. They're not struggling with drug and alcohol addiction. They're not struggling with families disintegrating or spiraling into the depths of despair. Right? No one is gathering stats on blissfully, gleeful people out there. This is something to think about. You're on one side of it. PTG points to the hope that waits for you on the other side.”

I read through more of the printout and hear the mumbling of somebody reading along with me. I pause and point to a section I think is applicable to the ideals of The Salvation Army. *Am I doing this because I am being watched?* I read, “Spirituality has been shown to highly correlate with growth, and in fact many of the most deeply spiritual beliefs are a result of traumatic exposure. Social support is well documented as a buffer to trauma.”

I look up and say, “Remember the people who said they wished they would have kept in touch with their friends more? Loneliness, and then suffering trauma, I think that would be...I can't imagine surviving that all by myself.”

Orion arms crossed, stiff-faced, and tight-lipped says, “I did when I got hit by a car. I spent way too much time in my room by myself. The only positive was that my cousin would come over once a week and sometimes not even that often. It sucked.”

Thankful someone is joining in, I ask, “And you hung on for that, right?”

He nods. “I hung on for that and I craved for more and I couldn't get it, so I drank. It really pissed me off to be trapped in my room.”

“It might have helped you stay away from drinking if he came over more often?”

“Maybe, who knows, we probably would have just drank together,” he says looking around the room and forcing a laugh.

I continue reading aloud, through the results and characteristics of those who have experienced post-traumatic growth: greater appreciation of life, a changed sense of priorities, warmer more intimate relationships, a greater sense of personal strengths, recognition of the possibilities for one's life and spiritual development. I look around the table. “What I'm trying to introduce, in the event you haven't heard it before, there's a positive side, something to work toward, and it involves trying to figure out how your life is going to change for the better after a trauma. Let's go to the last page, where it says related concepts. There is resilience. People can be resilient. Do you know what that is?” I ask.

Orion answers, “Yes ma'am.”

Orion seems to be the only one to speak up and his mood while usually sarcastic and biting has taken on an amped up, angry tone. I keep talking. “Resilience is the ability to bounce back, hardiness,” I point to Orion. “The ability to be hit by a car, bounce back and fight for your life is an example of resilience. Turn back to page one. Let's take a moment to read through the four kinds of resilience that contribute to post-traumatic growth. You'll find scientifically-proven activities that you can do every day to build resilience.”

“First, building physical resilience means your body can withstand more stress and heal itself faster. The number one thing you can do is to not sit still, that's all it takes. Next is mental resilience; it means you have more mental focus, more discipline, determination, and willpower; and we know from research is that willpower works like a muscle. It gets stronger the more you exercise it. They always recommend you start with a teeny little challenge.

“I’ll share an example, a story with you. I’ve been trying to get into the habit of taking a daily multi-vitamin for *years*. I get into the mindset to start. I do all this research and go to CVS and stand there scanning the vitamin shelves for hours it seems. I read labels, look up reviews online, then pick the best vitamins. I go home and I take them every night...

“...for three days. Then, two years later I find the bottle and they’ve expired and I ask myself, ‘why can’t I stick to this?’ You will all be proud to know, since my near-death experience in December, I have been faithfully taking vitamins every day. I’ve been doing it up until this point and I am a whole month-and-a-half in. So sometimes things happen that trigger resilience, mental resilience.”

Talon interjects, “You can’t just take vitamins; you have to eat right too.”

I laugh and say, “Of course, of course. But, if you don’t eat right all the time, taking a vitamin can help a little bit, right? It offsets a little bit?”

“I’ll give you that,” he says and shows a space of about an inch between his thumb and forefinger. He seems serious. Is it that they’re feeling stifled? Or, maybe I’ve taken on the role of teacher and lost the “participant-observer/being part of the group” feeling I worked to build?

“Thank you for giving me that much,” I laugh in spite of the mood feeling tense and stiff. I continue, “According to the research here, they say to start with a tiny little thing, right? And do it. Stick to that one task over and over. If you’re able to do that, it helps build you up for the next time you have to face something bigger. That is mental resilience.”

Flynn says, “Like I haven’t had a drink in over 6 months?”

“Yes, I believe that could be considered both mental and physical resilience that you have been practicing. Good. Emotional resilience is up next. This means you have the ability to provoke powerful and positive emotions like curiosity or love. The final one is social resilience

which is gaining strength through interacting with your friends, your neighbors, your family, and your community. Note at the top of page two, people who work on boosting these four types of resilience—physical, mental, emotional, and social—live ten years longer than everybody else. Yes, I said *ten* years longer.”

Brice speaks up, “I am buying all of this, and I can see, I’m speaking for myself, I can see that I have some of these things, so perhaps there is some growth.”

“Yes,” I say, “Yes, I would say to each of you in this room, ‘you are resilient.’ I don’t think you would be in this room or working this program whether it’s the first time, or the tenth time, or the fifteenth time. You are resilient.”

“I can’t help but see our entire program summed up right here,” Major Joe blurts out.

*Whew.* Relief fills my body. “Oh, really?” I ask.

“It’s all right here; it’s so simple,” he says as he stands and moves toward the table, shaking the information sheets I provided.

“It’s so simple that it’s complicated,” Orion interjects.

Major Joe continues, “Like your vitamins. The mental resilience. The emotional resilience. I tell these guys all the time, ‘You’re right there, now the grind begins. We want you to do the step work. We want you to be engaged in classes. We want you to be exercising. We want you to get up and shave. Keep yourself right, work every day, be social and be spiritual.’”

I nod and say, “Yes, I find that a lot of the things I bring to the table in group resonate with what the guys are doing outside of group. I hear over and over, ‘Well, that’s what we talked about just this morning in devotion,’ or ‘This is what my counselor just said to me in conversation.’ I find my curriculum works well with the men’s goals.”

Talon adds, “I remember my grandfather in New York would hang out with other Italian

men and they would all go and be involved in some kind of social club. Those are all gone now. That was his whole social routine.”

“Yes,” I say, “my grandfather was Italian as well and he had his group ...”

“For us here, we are replacing it with A.A.,” Brice says.

“Exactly,” Major Joe agrees.

I wrap up this section. “So there you go, read through the rest on your own time. I’ve included all the links so that you don’t think I came up with all this brilliance on my own.”

Snickers and laughter.

Major Joe heads toward the door. “Thanks for letting me in. This was a great class.”

Men yell out, “Anonymity!”

I back them up and say, “What said in here stays in here,” as he walks out the door.

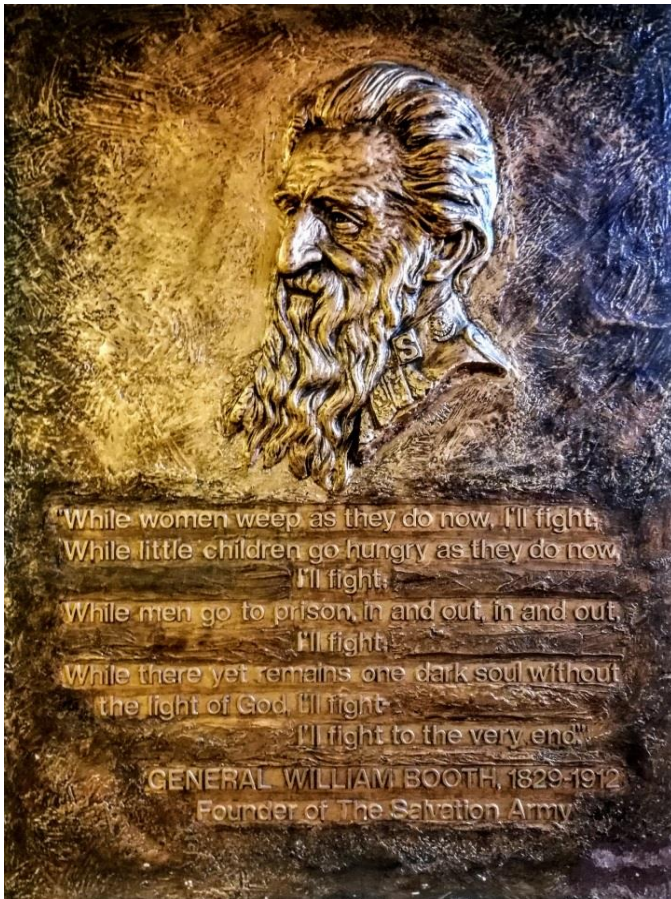
I turn to the guys and say, “Well, that was a little nerve-wracking.”

Flynn perks up, “He’s a good guy.”

“Oh, I’m sure he is. It’s just this is the first time we’ve ever been observed here in this group,” I try to explain myself.

“Well, he didn’t know it was a closed group,” Flynn adds.

I drop it. “Okay, here is your reflection sheet for next week. It’s about regret. This one starts with the Walt Whitman poem, *I Sit and Look Out*. I did not realize it until recently, but it reminds me of the words on the plaque in the lobby by William Booth.”



**Figure 10:** Photo of General William Booth plaque in lobby of The Salvation Army, Tampa, Florida

## I Sit and Look Out by Walt Whitman

*I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world,  
and upon all oppression and shame;*

*I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men,  
at anguish with themselves, remorseful after deeds  
done;*

*I see, in low life, the mother misused by her children,  
dying, neglected, gaunt, desperate;*

*I see the wife misused by her husband—I see the  
treacherous seducer of young women;*

*I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love,  
attempted to be hid  
—I see these sights on the earth;*

*I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny—I see  
martyrs and prisoners;*

*I observe a famine at sea—I observe the sailors  
casting lots who shall be kill'd,  
to preserve the lives of the rest;*

*I observe the slights and degradations cast by  
arrogant persons upon laborers,  
the poor, and upon negroes, and the like;*

*All these—All the meanness and agony without end, I  
sitting, look out upon,  
See, hear, and am silent.*

“William Booth was our general,” Brice offers.

“I didn’t realize,” I say.

“Yeah, he founded The Salvation Army.”

“That’s right. I remember reading about him.”

I read through Walt Whitman’s poem and then say, “Think about something you’ve done or not done that you now regret. You can tell a new story or elaborate on a story you’ve already told. If you choose to elaborate on a story you’ve already shared, try to give more details, explore emotions, thoughts, and feelings. This is us diving deeper, into the ugly, and I know some people

say we don't need to worry about regret. We're supposed to look forward and not look backward.

“Yes, it's not good to revel in regret, but if we don't remember—and I'm not saying you have to roll around in the regret—but you have to remember what you've done to make sure you keep moving forward. The person who continually does the same things he regrets yet says, ‘I can't believe I did that again,’ cannot pretend it never happened.”

Talon adds, “Yeah, we're supposed to move forward and evolve into better people.”

“Right, the people who keep doing the same harmful things, it's because they don't know any better,” Lathan says.

“Exactly,” I say. “When you know better, you do better.”

Brice asks, “So, I'm thinking about the write up I got for forgetting to turn in my cell phone. Can I write about that?”

“Hmm, well, I don't think you held onto your cell phone willfully. I think you just forgot to turn it in. I think time is wasted regretting something you did accidentally.”

He clarifies, “So you mean to write about regrets for things I've done willfully? Like the crimes I've committed?”

“Yes, a story about a crime you committed would be a regret to write about. If it ever becomes too difficult to write about an event because it feels too close or personal, there's a trick I can teach you. Writing in third person, like the event was happening to someone else, distances you from the event (Crawley, 2010). You can write it like ‘he did this’ and ‘he did that.’ Does this make sense to you?”

“Cool,” Flynn says, “I'm going to try that out!”

Marcus sighs and asks, “Are we ever going to talk about positive things?”

“Yes, we are diving deeper now as we near the middle of the round of sessions. Toward



the end we come out of it and talk about more positive things. Are you hanging in with us?"

He shakes his head and answers, "Yes, I am hanging in."

"Okay, we have about three minutes. Let's do a one word check out."

Orion starts us off. "I'm content."

Flynn yawns and says, "Relaxed."

"Content, relaxed, good," I say, then look at Lathan.

"I'm caught somewhere between trust and fear," he says.

"Hmm, trust and fear, it doesn't feel like a comfortable place to be in."

"No, it isn't."

I ask, "Lathan, will you stay behind for a minute after group lets out? Do you have time?"

"Sure," he answers.

"Thanks. Next," I say and look at Marcus.

"I'm tired, that's all."

"Thank you. My turn. I am still discombobulated from our surprise visitor."

Brice asks, "What's discombobulated?"

"Kind of confused and off balance," I answer.

"Ah," he says. "I'm feeling tired and content."

"Thank you. Talon?"

"I am confused."

"Oh no, confused? What's going on?" I ask.

"I don't know if I should go to the gym or if I should just chill."

"Oh," I laugh, "I thought you were confused about something you learned in here."

"No, no, no," he says.

“Okay, good. What do you have for us Zeke?”

“I’m tired and content.”

“Thank you, gentlemen. Have a great week!” I say as they pack up and head out.

Lathan lingers behind but seems closed off and unwilling to talk. I ask if he’s okay. I tell him I’m worried about him, that his energy is changing. I ask if there’s anything I can do. I ask if there’s someone in our group or at the facility he trusts to talk to and tell him I’d like to connect them before I leave for the night. I let him know I will not be comfortable leaving without knowing someone is looking out for him. He allows me to call Marcus back into the room and I share with the both of them my concerns. Marcus tells me he’s got it and they head off together.

While I am still worried, I know I have done all I can. Lathan has not done anything that warrants me telling the facility and he is with someone he trusts. *Was it unfair for me to place this burden on Marcus*, I now wonder. *Too late*. I pack up and head to my car.

Was Major Joe sent in to monitor our group? Is observation something I’ve managed to dodge for the past few rounds or is it a new procedure? I’ll look for Chris next week and ask.

I laugh and shake my head. The men clammed up and I babbled. They felt unsafe to speak and I felt compelled to fill the void by talking. I cannot say exactly why the men did not talk as freely; I can only make guesses. The Major is a gatekeeper, someone who has sway and pull in the facility. The men are expected to follow rules and comply in order to continue to have a safe place to stay. Maybe some stories are off limits. Maybe they are supposed to talk about God and being clean and the future while my prompts allow for stories about being drunk and high, earthly problems, and the past.

I know why I babbled. I felt like I had something to prove, like I needed to show I knew what I was talking about. I felt the need to demonstrate I had done the research, that I am capable

and effective as a group leader. As a non-addict (at least not labelled or in recovery), I felt I needed to show I understand the struggles, fears, problems, and difficulties the men I work with have faced and are currently facing.

I know I ruminate, hash, and rehash situations, making them bigger and more daunting than they really are. I feel foolish, like I babbled when I was being observed. Maybe it's my imagination and instead all the talking I did came across as enthusiasm or passion for the topics we discussed. I am reassured that the Major said my group aligns with the work the men do at The Salvation Army. While I did not seek or need his approval, it helps to know what I do supports the men and does not detract or derail them from the work they are tasked with accomplishing as part of the program that seems to be saving their lives.



**Figure 11.** Another mandala a participant gave me

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### REGRET

As I pack up my supplies to prepare for group, I notice that the snack bag is mostly plain Lays. In an effort to get rid of them and be equitable, I make sure there are exactly seven packs of plain Lays. I wonder if I'll catch some flack.

I arrive with a few minutes to spare. Jax sees me approach and runs out to greet me taking the heavy supplies from my arms. "Hi Lisa; guess what!"

"Hi Jax. Tell me!"

"They hired me on as a driver here. Thank God. I was about to run out of time and have to get a place at a halfway house."

"That's awesome! And this means you get to live here?"

"Yep, and I think I get my own room instead of sharing with three other guys."

"Oh, that's going to be wonderful. Congratulations!" I tell him. "I'm so happy for you."

He drops my stuff off on the conference room table and whistles as he walks away. I set up and place the bags of plain Lays around the table for each participant. I plug in the microphone, turn on the recorder, and wait for everyone to settle in. It's a few minutes after six and Lathan's seat is still empty. I look around and ask if anyone knows what's happening.

Marcus lets me know that Lathan left a few days ago to help a friend on the outside and that he didn't make it back before curfew.

"Curfew? What time is that?"

“It’s at eleven,” Orion says.

“And what happens if you’re late?” I ask.

“You’re out,” Marcus says shaking his head.

“No grace period? No second chance?” I ask.

“Nope. If you are even a minute late, you’re out.”

Talon joins the conversation. “It’s not like we don’t know there’s a curfew. You have to make sure you’re back in time. That’s it. I always aim to be back by ten thirty. I don’t risk it.”

“I get it,” I say, “The rules are the rules.”

“I think he knew he wasn’t coming back. Last week, you thought something was going on. That’s why you asked me to come back and talk to him,” Marcus adds.

“The pull for the outside life is so strong,” Zeke says.

“What’s up with the plain potato chips?” Orion asks. “You know I like Cheetos.”

“Ha, I was waiting to hear about the limited choices tonight. I have to get rid of these before I can stock up on new selections. Help me out. Eat up.” Tonight, the darkness and anger that hide below Orion’s funny façade is showing.

“I’ve got your back, Lisa,” Talon says as he takes two bags. “I’ll eat Lathan’s.”

“Alright, thanks,” I say, “Before we get started, I’d like to talk about what it felt like to have a visitor walk in on us last week. I know you all said it would be okay for him to stay.”

“Like we’re going to tell him he can’t stay when he’s basically in charge,” Orion snaps.

“Orion, I noticed your whole body tense up and your tone change when he walked in; you seemed upset. Did anyone else feel the shift?” I ask.

Heads nod, but no one really says anything.

“I probably sounded mad because I hate when someone is sitting directly behind me. It

bothers me when I can't see what's happening back there," Orion says.

"That's a good awareness to have," I encourage. "How did the rest of you feel?"

"I just knew I wasn't going to say anything personal in front of him," Talon adds.

I wonder if he's afraid to admit he has cravings for alcohol in front of any of the higher ups. I hope he's opened up and discussed the desire to drink with his sponsor.

"I didn't mind him being here," Brice says coloring his mandala. "He didn't bother me."

"I was a little worried that he might not appreciate what we do in here, but luckily he felt like our activities align with the mission of The Salvation Army. I was very nervous when he walked in, and like you, I didn't feel I had the right or authority to ask him to leave. I was relieved at his feedback though," I say. "Okay, who wants to check in first?"

Orion tosses his bag of chips to Talon, "You can have mine too and I'll start us off."

"Thanks!" Talon yelps.

"As usual, I am satisfied, content, every day is a holiday. You gotta be grateful. People tell me it's easy for me to say, but my life has not been a party. When you watch your own father kill your mother," he laughs a nervous laugh and continues, "and he locked us in closets for days on end, and my mother would get punished if she came over and fed us. It wasn't the best life, but my life now? I am thankful. You know I've done some bad things in my life, crimes, hurt people, yada, yada, yada, but today, I am thankful and satisfied. I woke up. It's a good day."

"Thanks for all that," I say.

"I'd be better if I had Cheetos," he mumbles back and laughs.

I don't respond. There's tension and it would serve no purpose to engage further. Maybe he's joking, maybe not. I make a note to pick up Cheetos to avoid any future problems.

"I'm fine with these chips," Flynn says as he rips into his bag. "I'm feeling confident,

been working out, lost a bit of weight. I've been working out spiritually too, almost got my eighth step done." He licks his fingers, looks at the wheel, and continues, "Confident, faithful, and valuable. Oh, and I have good news. I think I have a job lined up for when I finish."

"How exciting! When will you know for sure?" I ask.

"He'll let me know in two weeks and it's going to pay close to forty thousand a year."

"Wow, congratulations. That's amazing! I'll keep my fingers crossed for you."

"How'd you get that job?" Orion asks.

"I worked with the guy a few years ago and I told him I was here and getting clean. He said he's proud of me. He's in recovery too," Flynn answers.

"How nice to work for someone who knows the struggle," I say.

"Yep," Flynn says and leans back in his chair.

"Thanks for the awesome check-in," I say. "Who's next?"

Brice starts, "I'm feeling good. I got my teeth cleaned and even though I need a tooth pulled, I feel good knowing that I only need one pulled."

"Good news," I say. Decaying and missing teeth are one of the men's main health issues and concerns. Some have trouble eating because of ill-fitting dentures or abscesses. Others cover their mouths when they talk or laugh to hide gaps in their teeth. While their issues are addressed at The Salvation Army, participants sometimes feel it can take too long for them to get relief.

"Anything else, Brice?" I ask.

"Nope," he answers, as he takes a small bite off a potato chip.

Talon tilts his head back, opens his mouth, and pours what's left of the first bag onto his tongue and down his throat. We all laugh as he holds his finger up to ask us to wait on him to finish chewing. He takes a long sip of a gargantuan Monster® drink, belches, and begins, "I'm

like the dot in the middle, neutral, numb, not in a bad way, but I should be really, really angry.”

I try to interpret, “Maybe trapped, unsure, where every feeling culminates in the middle?”

He does not respond to what I’ve said and continues, “My ex is taking me back to court and a few years ago, I would have been losing my shit. My buddies here are kind of wondering if I’m okay. And, I am. I’m feeling weirdly calm. I feel as though I’ve got this with God’s help.”

“So, you’re okay?” I confirm.

“Yes, I’m good.”

“Okay, then. Zeke?” I say.

“I’m serene and content, thank the Lord. I ate well, I slept well. It’s a great day even though it’s raining. We need it. I’m a bit discouraged though...”

“Oh? What’s going on?” I ask.

“There are no Cheetos in the bag today.”

*Oh, shit.* “Ummm...” He’s openly mocking Orion. Do I call it out?

Zeke laughs. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it. I am fine with these chips. I don’t know why people are fussing. I’m grateful for whatever you bring.”

Orion mutters something under his breath.

Before anything more can be said, I burst out with, “My turn to check in. I am really sad that Lathan did not make it back in time. I feel like he brought some good insights to the table.”

Orion says, “I see how it is.”

“Let me clarify,” I continue, “The wide variety of perspectives helps us see our own stories through different eyes. We have lost an active participant. This will impact how we move forward. Know that I am grateful for each and every one of you here tonight but my thoughts are with Lathan too. I hope he finds his way.”



“He’ll figure it out,” Marcus says.

“How are you today, sir?” I ask. “You are the last one to check in tonight.”

Marcus rubs his head with both his hands before speaking. “Well, I’m depressed, a little, I’m just sick of dealing with feelings, burnt out dealing with feelings. Now they’ve volunteered me for a grievance class, more feelings.”

I’m pretty sure he means a group about grief and loss.

Brice interjects, “I’ve heard it’s a good class. I’m signed up too.”

Marcus ignores Brice and keeps talking. “I don’t know why they’re making me do this. Yes, my son died, but I’m sick of dealing with feelings. I feel like I’m in a mental hospital.”

“You know feelings are always there,” I say.

“What feelings are always there?” he asks.

“We cannot walk through life without feeling. We can pretend, but they’re always there, and what we are doing in this room, what all these people at the ARC are doing is trying to help you sort them out in some way. I hope that what you’re getting from me is I’m not telling you what feelings to deal with. I’m just saying that whatever feelings you have, you can deal with them in here through journaling. Life is feelings.”

He sighs and says, “I know life is feelings, but I am sick of dealing with painful feelings. I’ve been there. I’ve written everything about it. There is nothing else to write out. I don’t know what folks are looking for, what are they looking to hear, I mean once I get it out...”

“Then what, right?” I say.

He continues, “What am I supposed to get out of it? I deal with things spiritually. I ask God to help me with this. What am I saying about God if I keep bringing it up, if I keep dwelling in the past? I don’t beat myself up about things I’ve done. I’ve totally surrendered that and let it

go. When I came in, they said I need to put this on paper. I put it out on paper. Now what am I supposed to feel?"

"What if instead of writing about those things, you write about maybe what you'd like to do moving forward."

"I've done that."

"I know, but you can continue to do that, because you can create new days every day looking forward, but if it's..."

He cuts me off, "You all just don't understand. Nobody understands."

I acquiesce, "Maybe I don't get it. What I think I'm hearing you say is that once you put it on a paper you don't want to have to think about it again."

"No," Marcus clarifies, "Once I put it on paper and I go back over it and read it, I wait a day or two and I read it again. I'm trying to see what it is that I missed from it. What is it that I'm supposed to get from it? To me, it's just what I felt on a piece of paper that I already know how I felt. Maybe other people feel they get something out of it. Sometimes I think I should have just stayed in my shell."

I am in awe of the work he puts in. I let him know I'm glad he didn't stay in his shell.

He makes eye contact and says, "I try to look at the positive side of it. I don't look at everything negative. I look at the positive side. Okay, maybe I'm going through an emotion thing, because it's all new to me. This is something that I've never had to do before."

"Wow," I say, "That is very self-aware of you. You are saying 'oh my gosh, maybe I am bucking this because it's all new.'"

He nods, "I mean, there is a fight, because I'm asking myself questions. I'm like what is this all for? What am I supposed to feel? What am I supposed to get out of this? I mean, I don't

hold it in anymore so I don't know, this is new to me, you know?"

"I get it," I say. "Maybe at the end you will have something to tell me."

He picks up a marker and resumes coloring his mandala, "Maybe, I don't know..."

No one speaks. I sit and listen to the sound of crunching chips, crackling snack bags, and the scratching of markers on paper as several participants work on coloring their mandalas.

I interrupt the rhythm. "Alright, gentlemen, tonight we're going to do something a little different. I am passing around the outline of a face (Appendix A4(f)). The front has the outline of a face and the back is blank. Does everyone have a copy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Here's what we are going to do. Brené Brown (2015) says we wear masks to protect ourselves from feeling vulnerable or like we're not enough. Sometimes the masks show only the parts of us we think are good and likeable. Or, we pretend we are something we are not and wear them to hide our perceived flaws. What I'd like you to do is write words that describe how you want to appear to others, how you'd like to be seen on the front, within the outline of the face."

Marcus says, "I don't get it."

"I'll say a few things out loud that apply to me to help explain. I will write on the front of my paper that I want to appear knowledgeable, confident, strong, and whole when I walk around in the world. On the back, the things I feel I need to hide or that I am ashamed of feeling are scared, needy, shy, and broken. Does that help?"

"Yes," Marcus says as he starts writing.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Brice drawing a face with a goatee, hair, and tears. We work in silence for a few minutes. I add a few more words to mine. When I notice most of the pens are down, I begin, "Who wants to start us off?"

“I’ll go,” Orion says, “First, I want to add, thank you for always saying something like you are one of us, for being open and sharing part of who you are with us.”

I am caught off guard, “Oh, thanks Orion. I wouldn’t feel right asking you to tell me your personal things if I wasn’t willing to share some of mine with you.”

“Here goes. On the front, how I want others to see me is funny, caring, carefree, thankful, strong, in control, and accepting. Underneath, what I am hiding? There’s nothing. I am an open book. What you see is what you get.”

“Okay, thank you for starting us off,” I say. “Who’s next?”

Flynn speaks up, “I’ll go. On the front, how I want to appear: polite, caring, trusting, loyal, positive, solid, role-model. On the back, what I’m hiding, what I hope others do not see: weak, unstable, not sure, sensitive, moody, stubborn, and self-conscious.”

“Nice job. Thank you. Next.”

Marcus sighs. “Oh boy, here goes. On the front, I wrote ‘no weakness, no cracks in my armor, I am a doer and a finisher, a go-getter, strong, and a support to my wife. On the inside, I am afraid, ashamed, guilty, sinful, a monster, sad, lost, buried forever in the mind.’”

“Marcus, thank you,” I say.

Brice speaks up, “I think I did this wrong.”

“No worries,” I assure. “There’s no right or wrong. Whatever you came up with is right.”

“Well, I drew a face.”

The guys burst out laughing.

“Don’t get me wrong, you did good,” Flynn says.

“You did,” I agree.

“Well, here’s what I wrote on the front: smart, compassionate, respectful, and nice. On

the back, I wrote: not so smart and shy.”

“Thank you, Brice,” I say.

Three empty chip bags sit in front of Talon. He clears his throat and begins, “On the front, the way I want to appear to others is godly, faithful, competent, friendly, compassionate, approachable, tolerant, peaceful, and content. Underneath it all, what I’m hiding: desperate, frustrated, inadequate, hopeless, distrustful, incomplete, lost, insecure, and ignorant.”

“Wow, Talon, a lot of thought went into your list. Thank you.” I turn to Zeke.

Zeke nods and reads, “On the outside, I hope I come off as wise, patient, understanding, sympathetic, courteous, and friendly. What I hope no one can see is that I’m fearful, closed-minded, confused, arrogant, shallow, and inconsiderate. You know something I’ve noticed?”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Underneath, what we’re hiding, most of us, are feelings of insecurity and shame.”

“Good call. What does that say to you?” I prompt.

“That we all might be dealing with some of the same feelings of not being good enough and since we only see what people want to show us, maybe we don’t need to feel intimidated by someone who seems to have their shit together.”

“What do you all think about that?” I ask the table.

“Every time we sit in this room and learn more about each other, I feel like I know these guys better, and it makes me feel closer to everyone in this room,” Brice offers.

“So sharing stories and feelings and fears with each other might be a way to form closer bonds with people we care about and love. Is that what I’m hearing?” I ask.

“In this room it’s safe to do this kind of talk. It’s not like I can go out there and tell the others anything too personal. They’ll use it against me the first chance they get,” Talon adds.

“So, it sounds like you have to be careful where you are and with whom you share these secrets, these truths. Can you see how you might make this work later, on the outside, when you are not living with a hundred other men in close quarters?” I ask and smile.

“A hundred and fifty men you mean,” Orion says and laughs.

“Yeah, I can see how this might work to build trust or confidence in a relationship. I’d be worried I might come off as soft though,” Zeke says.

“Every week, we come to this room and hear each other’s stories. I don’t know about you, but I do not think of any of you as ‘soft’ in this room. All that you’ve survived, endured, bounced back from, and strive for? I am impressed and amazed,” I say.

Flynn knocks on the table and says, “You’re right. There’s not one guy in here I think is soft, even those who shed a tear.”

“That’s a cultural perception, right? Men are supposed to be strong, silent, in control. I want you to name an emotion you as men feel safe expressing in public, outside this room, outside on the street.”

“Safe?” Marcus asks.

“Safe might not be the right word. An emotion you feel is acceptable to express. An emotion no one makes fun of you for showing,” I clarify.

“Oh I see what you’re saying...mad, angry,” Marcus says.

“Do you all agree?” I ask.

The guys call out other words: pissed off, volatile, and furious.

“Right, so when you’ve been let down, or you’re afraid, or ashamed, sometimes that gets expressed as anger because that is an emotion you’re (air quotes) “allowed” to show and you’re (air quotes) “expected” to show. In here, in group, we’re learning that other emotions run

through us that maybe you didn't even have a word for. And if you don't have a word for something, a name or label, it's hard to understand it. Part of the work we are doing here is learning a wider variety of names or words for emotions that you all feel but might get mistaken for or channeled into anger. I hope I'm making sense here."

Flynn nods and says, "Oh, you are, total sense." Others are nodding and agreeing.

"Alright, I'm going to switch direction now. Remember reading Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* last week and how we wrote a few lines of our own? Well, I compiled all of our work into one big poem, our answer to Frost's poem. Take one and pass it around."

"What's this?" Marcus asks.

"Remember the poem we wrote on last week. I put all our words together to make a new poem, our poem, something we created together," I tell him.

Orion perks up. "Really, these are our words?"

"Yes," I answer, "now I'm going to read through it once out loud and then I'd like you to each read through your stanza, you'll see your participant number in the margin. And, Lathan's words are here too. Okay, here goes..."

### **Our Response to Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken***

*If I could go back to where my paths begin,  
I wonder, would I choose the same,  
This road I've travelled, seasoned in sin,  
Broiled and baked in pain.*

*To whom do I owe my life's results?  
Is it he, is it she, or me?  
Who should receive the finger of fault?  
Who will dry these tears of mine?*

*Tormented by fiends, with no escape, no friends,  
His face blank like his life,  
Illustrated through all of the pain,  
But when the sun hit his face, he began to walk through the rain.*

*The roads of life all lead different ways,  
Some are easy to follow, some are torn and frayed,  
The ones less travelled are somewhat unknown,  
But they can hold secrets that leave the mind blown.*

*Two roads diverged, going nowhere,  
Getting confused, which way, left or right,  
Tell myself, a sign, the road less travelled to God,  
And that made all the difference.*

*Two roads, one narrow, one wide,  
The wide road is wild,  
The narrow will assure me everlasting life,  
Because it is a calm road.*

*Here I stand knowing I am very blessed,  
The road has not been easy, very stressed,  
However I stand chest bowed out with no regrets,  
Thank you Lord for another day!*

I put the stanzas in an order that made the most sense. I think it works. What do you think?"

"Man, you sure we wrote this? You didn't change any of the words?" Flynn asks.

"Nope, didn't change a thing. Some of the words were hard to read and I did my best to figure them out. So, if you see that I did not capture exactly what you wrote, let me know and I'll make a corrected copy. Okay, let's go through and you each read the stanza you wrote."

We go around the room and each participant reads their contribution to our shared work. I watch them as they admire and delight in having played a part in the poem.

"I'm going to frame this when I get my own place," Flynn says.

Orion sits up straight and blurts, "That reminds me. In another group they asked me where I thought I'd be a year from now. I said I wanted my own place, to be loved by someone that would love me back, a nine to five job, and they interrupted me and said I should not be thinking of these things. That a woman was the last thing I should be thinking about. But, I told them, 'you asked what I wanted a year from now and I answered.'"



I agree, “Yes, you were asked what you wanted.”

He leans back into his chair. “It upset me but I was glad I have this class to come to because here we can say what’s on our minds and in our heart. We all have such a cool rapport.”

I nod, and say, “Yes, because we're not just going to look at each other as this one thing, as an alcoholic on the road to recovery, right? Because we are all more than any of those things, and you have plenty of other places where you can talk about all of that. So hopefully this gives you, I don't want to in any way counter or contradict what you're doing in other classes but this is an outlet for you, and that is the point of keeping a journal, it is an outlet. It’s a private outlet to say anything and everything you want to say, right?”

“I have to tell you all something,” Flynn says.

“Okay,” I say and look around the room nodding and smiling. “We are listening.”

He continues, “Remember that other story I shared with you about when I was stabbed by my girlfriend’s stepdad. I decided to try and find him to make amends as part of my ninth step. Well, my counselor helped me look him up and we found out that he died two years ago.”

My heart sinks. “Oh, no,” I say.

“No, wait, it’s not all bad,” Flynn says. “I have found huge relief from sharing that story in here with you all. I actually had a dream about him the other day. He came to visit me in my dreams. We met up. We made amends to each other. He told me he was just as guilty as me. That I was just a kid, that he should have just let me talk to him and get it out. We had a good talk in my dream, there’s closure there.”

I can feel my eyes heat up and sting. Tears threaten to flow. I blink and try to hold them in. My voice betrays me and cracks when I say, “That is amazing. How do you feel?”

Flynn answers, “I feel better. I feel free. I never wanted to tell that story. I was heavy

with shame. I tried to bury the story but I thought this might be a good time to let it out.”

I ask, “Do you think exploring stories in this format is helpful and has had impact?”

“Absolutely, there’s no way I would have ever thought about these moments, approached these subjects, let alone told these stories to anyone if I wasn’t in this group. Getting these stories down on paper and out and into the universe, I get some freedom from this. I know God doesn’t want me strapped down with this guilt.”

“Amen,” Talon says.

“Whew,” I say. “Your relief is palpable. I can feel it in the air, see it in your face.”

“Ironically,” Flynn adds, “I did not spend a bunch of time on this week’s reflection paper. I felt overwhelmed and just wrote a few words.”

“That’s okay,” I say. “That’s a good introduction to hearing what you all wrote about with regard to regret.”

Papers shuffle as they look for their work and pull it from their folders.

“I’ll start us off because I’d like to share a story about a time when I realized past regrets have helped me get to a point where I avoided a new regret.”

“Huh,” Brice looks bewildered.

“Let me explain. Remember the story I told you about having been in a bad accident many years ago?”

Flynn asks, “When the guy who was eating a taco crashed into you?”

“Yes, that accident. Well, I’ve been in so many and I swear, none were my fault.”

Scoffing and laughter fill the room.

“I know people say it’s not their fault, but it’s true. I have been t-boned twice, rear-ended six times, and thrown through two intersections.”

Marcus turns toward me. “What? Good Lord.”

“I know! I don’t even have to be in the car to be in an accident. My car has been hit three times when it was parked. Anyway, let me get back to the topic of regret. Remember how I said after that accident I examined my life and felt ashamed of how I was living and how I journaled about the things I wanted to do to make my life better?”

“And how you did it all...” Zeke adds.

“Yes,” I say. “Well, in my most recent accident, my worst one yet, I was stopped at a light and a guy in a truck doing about fifty slammed into me and threw me into a ditch. I had to be taken by ambulance to the hospital. As I was lying on the gurney in the emergency room, I thought about my life, where I am, what I’m doing, how I treat my kids and friends and loved ones, what I’ve accomplished in school, and what we do in here. I couldn’t think of anything I would be doing differently. I realized that if that was my last moment, I would have left this world feeling proud and accomplished. This was so different from the way I felt all those years ago. This exercise, understanding what it is you regret doing or not doing, will help you avoid repeatedly feeling regret for the same things over and over. Does this make sense?”

“It sure does,” Flynn says. “We can make different choices if we recognize what choices got us into trouble in the first place.”

“Exactly! Do you want to start us off with what you managed to write, Flynn?”

“Sure,” he answers, “I have too many regrets to think about. I’ve shared a bunch in here. For this paper though, I wish I would have never started drinking in the morning. That was a turning point between being able to hold down a job and me being fired for showing up to work drunk. I found ways to justify it and thought a few beers in the morning couldn’t make a difference. But, it did. It made all the difference in the world.

“The one thing I will say is there was nothing anyone could have said or done to keep me from making the choices I made. The only person I might have listened to, but I doubt it, was my football coach. I was too concerned with fitting in, and for me to fit in was to take up the things I should have stayed away from. Alcohol, drugs, money, and women, nothing else mattered and nothing else grabbed my attention. The flip side to this is if I hadn't been through what I've been through, would I be the man I am today? What can I do to change my past? Nothing. I can work on how I feel about my past, like we do in this class, but I can't change it. What can I do to change my future? Only work on myself in this present moment. And, that's what I'm doing.”

“Thank you, Flynn, thank you. Who's next?” I ask.

Brice puts up his hand, red marker entwined in his fingers. “I'll go next. One of the things I regret the most is stealing and pawning all of my mom's jewelry. I did it one piece at a time over several months. Each time I did it, each piece I stole, sunk me deeper into my depression. I knew that the situation was spiraling out of control. I couldn't stop. I went too far to turn back. That's when I decided to kill myself. That made it easier to continue to take her things and live with the shame. Knowing I'd be dead soon made it easier and easier to justify these heinous actions. I felt like I wouldn't have to face the consequences. But, you know I survived my attempt. I don't really have a mom anymore though. That's my biggest regret.”

My heart hurts listening to his story. Because of some of the precarious predicaments I had gotten myself into, my mother spent many years not trusting me and fearing I would steal and pawn her valuables. I never did. I was too proud or maybe scared. I knew I would not be able to live with myself if I took that step.

“Brice, thank you for sharing that with us.”

“Thank you for listening,” he says, an innocent, blank, pleasant look adorning his face.

Orion says, “Regret is poison. There is nothing that can be done about the past. It would be wise to learn from those mistakes to ensure similar outcomes will never occur again. At this point in my life, I put no stock in regret. That’s what I wrote.”

“Thank you for sharing, Orion. Marcus?”

Marcus smooths out his paper and begins to read, “I think about the way I treated my family and the husband and father I was to them. I could have done more to be there for my wife. I was never able to take care of all of her needs. I never gave her my all in any area of our life or marriage. She gives me chance after chance to be the husband I am supposed to be. She still supports me through my downs even though I have neglected her during my ups. She doesn't know of me as an alcoholic, but I know I'm an alcoholic and I know I could do better for her. My heart is hers and it always has been.”

“And here you are working on yourself, becoming better for her, your children, and yourself,” I say.

“Yes, with God’s help, this will be the time that sticks. I don’t have many chances left inside of me,” Marcus adds.

“Thank you, Marcus. Talon, you look ready to share.”

“Yes,” he says. “Here goes. I regret trying drugs. I could handle my drinking, it didn’t interfere too much, but drugs. I chose to use them over everything in my life, school, playing ball, my friends, my job, my family, my children—I can't believe they've seen me use. I used because I hated the world. I hope one day my kids and family understand that once it turned into an addiction, I lost the choice. I regret starting. That was a choice.”

“Thank you so much. I can hear the sadness, the pain in your voice when you said your kids saw you use,” I say.

“I was at my lowest. I didn’t care about anything. You use enough, you care about nothing. When I’m sober and clean, then I care, but I can’t stand knowing what I did so I use again to forget. It’s an awful spiral,” he adds.

“Thank you for sharing.”

Zeke looks at me and says, “Yes, last but not least,” and we all burst out laughing.

He looks nervous. The paper is shaking as he holds it to read. He takes a sip of water, clears his throat, and starts, “As long as I can remember, my dad was a raging alcoholic. My mother died when I was young and that undoubtedly played a role. Since I was eleven, I don’t remember a night when my dad didn’t pass out with a drink balancing in his hand. In the last few months of his life, he had three DUIs and had been kicked out of the house by my stepmom.

“He got a little apartment. I moved in with him for a little while and slept in the living room. I remember all the times I would come home and find him naked and incoherent on the sofa. One day, I was looking for something in his room. I saw an open notebook that he had been writing in and the words, ‘Instructions for Memorial.’ I began reading and realized I was reading his suicide letter. Numb, I read and reread this letter about fifteen times.

“I don’t know if I was in shock or disbelief but I never said anything to my dad. This is something I have come to regret. About a week later, my girlfriend and I came back from a trip and saw that the apartment was pitch-black. That’s unusual, I thought. I was sure I’d come back to find the TV blaring and him passed out on the couch. Instead, I turned the lights on and found that letter I had read many times before out on the coffee table.

“After calling the cops and telling them where my dad said he might be and getting confirmation that he did indeed kill himself, I went to the bathroom and let out the most primal and guttural screams I had in me. I have been plagued with regret and guilt since that moment. I

should have done something, anything to help my dad.” He stops reading, wipes his eyes, and looks at his fingers as he plays with the corner of the paper he just read.

I have no words inside me to soothe or comfort. Anything I could say would be insufficient. I say nothing at all.

The other participants speak up. “Thank you for sharing, man.”

“Don’t blame yourself.”

“You know you couldn’t have stopped him if he really wanted to go.”

“God’s got him now.”

I watch as they support and raise each other up. I know I am watching an important moment unfold. Three of the six participants have been impacted directly by suicide. All six participants have almost killed themselves “accidentally” through over-dosing, risk-taking behaviors, starting fights, and walking out in front of cars. They live on the precipice.

I finally feel as though I can address Zeke. “Thank you so much for sharing that difficult and painful moment with us.”

“You’re welcome,” he says.

I divert from my curriculum and check in with the participants, “I’d like to ask you guys how you feel about what’s happening so far up to this point. We’re two thirds of the way through. How do you feel about what’s going on in here? Do you feel like it’s useful?”

Orion answers first, “I wish we had more time to focus on this class rather than all the other stuff we have to do here at the ARC. This is a good class. We’re doing good things. You get good participation from us.”

Brice whispers, “I feel the same way. I wish we had more time.”

I joke, “Are you saying you want to be here for two hours?”

Laughter fills the room.

Brice laughs and looks up. “No, I just wish I had more time to work on the stuff in here. They keep us so busy; we're always on the move and it makes it hard for me to work on the stuff I'm supposed to work on for your class. You give us things I want to work on.”

Flynn chimes in, “For me this has been therapeutic. This is more like a group session but we can talk about real things, and it's helping me tremendously. My wish would be that at some point there would be a name for a group like this. We have group therapy, accountability groups, A.A. meetings; we need a new name for this kind of a group.”

I nod and say, “That's exactly my goal. My hope is to create something new, something that works outside of what’s already available to you all.”

Orion says, “This reminds me of the old encounter groups, but in encounter groups, you confront each other and you can have people jumping up and trying to strangle each other. This is nice. Encounter groups were more like confrontational recovery.”

Flynn shouts out, “Focus group! That’s what I meant.”

I love the work they do in here. “Awesome, I’ll write that word down, focus group, I like it. Because we're interactive, it's harder to doze off or refrain from participating. Nobody's at the front of the room droning on and on and on. We sit here together and we are all engaged, invested, and we all learn together which makes it more fun and interesting.”

Zeke says, “Another word came to me: it's a healing group. This group has helped me confront myself, start the process of forgiveness, which to me is healing.”

“I am happy to hear you are finding value in what we do in this room together,” I say.

Orion looks at Flynn and says, “It's amazing that I got to know you because of the stories you've told. The fact that we can get to know each other so well out of this group, you can't get



that out of any of the other groups or A.A.”

Flynn laughs and says, “I’ve got to tell you all about my home invasion story one day.”

Marcus laughs and shakes his head. “You got stories.”

We all laugh.

I pull out the next set of reflection papers and pass them to Marcus. “Take one and pass them around. This next activity is based on Brad Paisley’s song, *Letter to Me*.

Orion seems thrilled and exclaims, “Alright!”

I continue with the directions, “It’s a song and I am providing the lyrics to the song. He’s written a letter to his seventeen-year-old self.

“Awesome,” Flynn says.

“Now, who?” asks Marcus.

“Brad Paisley,” I repeat.

Marcus puts his paper down and asks, “Now who is Brad Paisley?”

Talon yells out, “He’s a country singer!”

Marcus huffs and asks, “How am I going to fit in on a song like that?”

Laughter fills the room.

I laugh too and say, “Don’t worry. You don’t have to listen to it. I’ll read through it for you all now. Listen to the lyrics, and after I explain the reflection exercise, you’ll understand why I picked this song. (See Appendix A2(g) for the full lyrics).

*If I could write a letter to me  
And send it back in time to myself at seventeen  
First I'd prove it's me by saying  
Look under your bed, there's a Skoal can and a Playboy  
No one else would know you hid  
And then I'd say I know it's tough  
When you break up after seven months  
And yeah I know you really liked her*

*And it just don't seem fair  
But I'll I can say is pain like that is fast and it's rare*

What do you all think?"

"Oh, I love this song," Orion says.

"Me too," Talon agrees.

I begin to clarify the instructions, "So, I put a few questions here to help you process. The goal is for you to write a letter to a younger version of yourself. What would you say to prove it's really you from the future? What would you warn that younger version of you to do or not do? Do you think you'd listen to the future you?"

"What age are we writing to?" asks Flynn.

"I'd say write to the seventeen-year-old version of yourself. But, if you think there's a better age, a more important time in your life, write to that version of you." I answer

Marcus tells me he'll give it a try. I let him know that is enough.

It's almost twenty minutes after seven. I decide to introduce a breathing exercise to close out group. "Okay, let's do something different for checkout tonight. We have time. I'd like you all to stand up."

Orion jokes, "Are you gonna make us do jumping jacks?"

I laugh and say, "No, it's something meant to calm and settle us, not get the blood flow pumping." I watch as they stretch and give each other funny looks. "Okay, hands on your hips. Stand straight with your knees flexible and feet shoulder width apart. We are going to take five deep breaths together. Not silly little surface breaths."

I take two quick, shallow breaths, exaggerating my shoulder movements, and they laugh.

"We are going to take deep, belly breaths, breathing in through the nose, and out through the mouth. We are going to get air down into the very bottoms of our lungs."

I take two very deep breaths, hands perched on my stomach, exaggerating the filling of my belly with air.

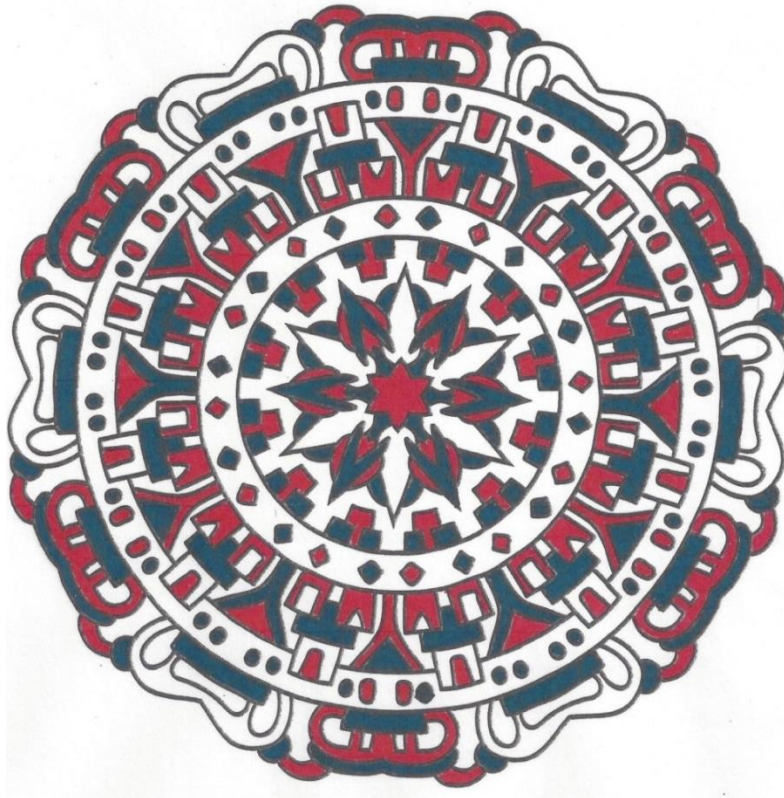
They laugh again and it takes a few moments to regroup.

“Come on guys. Let’s do this so you can get out of here on time.”

They quiet down, calm, and follow along as I take five slow, deep breaths.

I thank them. “Good job guys, thanks for indulging me. I think taking a few minutes to breathe and ground ourselves every once in a while is very helpful. Especially after some of the revealing, detailed, haunting stories we heard here tonight. Thank you for being willing to share parts of yourselves with all of us. We’ve got a few minutes left. You can get out a bit early but I’ll stick around if you want to chat.”

“Here Lisa,” Brice says and hands me a mandala. “This is for you.”



**Figure 12.** Brice's mandala

“Thank you, Brice! Would you like me to bring in another packet for you next week?”

His face lights up. “That would be great,” he says and heads out the door.

I make a note to bring in more mandalas next week. I begin to pack up and notice how tired I am. After taking in all the participants’ stories and pain, I experience what Goodman (2012) calls secondary trauma from being a “willing witness” (p. 8). I have very few places to dump my own pain and anguish and sharing their stories of betrayal, violence, and hurt would be a breach of confidentiality. I sometimes leave our group elated, overjoyed at the success stories I’ve heard and from the gratitude they’ve expressed. Other times, I leave and head straight to a bar and gulp down my tears along with the lump that forms when I ruminate on all I’ve taken in. I wonder how they’ve survived all they’ve endured.

I identify with some of their stories. I wonder if when I mothered my kids I did any of the harm the parents of my participants did to them. I wonder what stories my kids might tell later, of the ways I have let them down, neglected or betrayed them, or inflicted harm. I think of the ways I’ve told stories of my childhood and portrayed my parents and our circumstances.

I text my Ph.D. adviser (mentor/friend) before driving away from The Salvation Army:

Hi Carolyn, I need to chat if you have a few moments.  
Some great things are happening in group. Some sad  
things too. If you have time tonight or tomorrow, let  
me know.

My phone rings before I’ve even left the parking lot. It’s my adviser calling to tell me she has time to talk. I share what’s been happening in group, my responses, the men’s stories, activities we’ve done, and how tired I am. We compare and contrast running group against teaching an undergraduate class. She reminds me to take a break and disconnect from everything for a few minutes every day. She asks about my life, my kids, how I’m feeling and doing. It isn’t until we hang up that I realize I am not practicing the lessons I am teaching. I am not connecting

with others and finding time to socialize. Instead, I've been focusing on being the person others turn to and have slacked on cultivating or maintaining my own support system.

I recognize that not only am I taking on the stories my participants tell but I am also dealing with my own set of disruptions and mini-traumas that come from being alive. Two of my closest and best friends moved away recently and a third got married and is now unavailable to get together. I broke up with a boyfriend two years ago and have not been out on a single date since. I am overwhelmed with my work load—teaching four classes, taking three, working a part-time job, running this group, and am the go-to-person for my dad, sisters, and two children. On the surface, it seems like I am connecting to others but it's more like I am supporting others.

I don't see a way to remedy the situation at this time though. I'll continue to do the things I can fit into my schedule—eat well, get good sleep, do a bit of exercise, make time for monthly lunches with friends, and spend time with my kids. I remind myself there's an end in sight. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I will finish the doctoral program and be done with taking classes. There will be time to work on rebuilding my social support system. I am yanked from my thoughts by a text from my daughter:

Mom I put the money in your bank account for the car  
im craving Carrabbas, can i use the credit card to  
get takeout for us both and come over?

Before climbing out of the car, I text her back and tell her of course and to pick up my favorite, Chicken Bryan. Knowing she wants to come over and hang out with me warms my heart. I'm doing something right. I strip off the day along with my clothes, climb into sweats, and wait for dinner and my girl to arrive.

**CHAPTER SIX:**  
**LETTER TO PAST VERSION OF ME**

My son has been sleeping on my couch for the past few days. He plans to transform his vehicle into a camper/sleeper in the near future. I ask where he'll park to sleep and he tells me to not worry, "I'll figure it out, Ma." He plays video games throughout the night and drags himself to work with tired eyes and a sleepy gait. He works two jobs; both part-time, neither paying enough. He smokes but has plans to quit. He drinks more than he should. He wants to do better, be better, but the world feels too demanding for him. He says life is ridiculous and unnecessarily difficult. He doesn't see the point of working so hard and getting nowhere. He feels like he can't seem to get ahead or catch a break. I know these things because he tells me.

This morning, he drinks some of the coffee I pour him, eats a few bites of a corn cake, then heads to the fridge and cracks open a beer. Flynn's words ring through my head, "I wish I would have never started drinking in the morning. That was my turning point from being able to hold down a job and me being fired for showing up to work drunk. I thought a few beers in the morning couldn't make a difference. But, it did. It made all the difference in the world."

I tell my son about a guy who told me of his regrets. He says, "Good for him. That's him, not me." *I can handle it* is another myth the men repeatedly say they once bought into. They tell me the thought they are different than others and can handle their (insert drink or drug of choice here) is what gets them into trouble over and over. They also tell me no one could have said anything to make them stop. They had to do it on their own. I've said all I'm going to say.

I hug my son, tell him I love him, and head off to teach.

Driving to group tonight is nerve-wracking. I pass three accidents in the short span of two miles of Fowler Avenue. First, the traffic is directed to the far right because of an overturned SUV in the median near 56<sup>th</sup> Street. Then we are diverted to the left lanes to avoid the two cars tangled on the curb of 50<sup>th</sup> Street and, finally, I am forced to turn onto 15<sup>th</sup> Street to avoid the ambulances and firetruck blocking the forward flow. My heart is racing. Had I left my house any earlier, one of those accidents could have involved me. I take deep breaths and rub my forearm in an effort to self-soothe. It seems to be working until I glance at the clock. *Shit*, it's two minutes to six and I'm still ten minutes away. I call ahead and let the men know I'm running late.

"Sorry guys," I say as I spill my supplies onto the table.

"Ah, you knew better than to show up without my Cheetos," Orion exclaims snatching up the snack bag.

"Yes, I stocked up on all the favorites," I say and sink into my chair. Looking around, I notice some are coloring their mandalas and others are finishing reflection papers.

"Are you okay, Miss Lisa?" Brice asks.

"Just a little discombobulated. I really hate being late."

"Well, you're here now," he reassures me.

"Yes, I am. Thank you, Brice."

Mimicking me, he continues, "Using the wheel, would you like to check in first?"

Laughter fills the room.

"Ha, yes, I believe I would. Since discombobulated is not on the wheel, I'll look for words that are. Hmmm, I am feeling anxious because I saw three accidents on the way in here."

Marcus looks at me and says, “Being out on the road must be hard for you after all the wrecks you’ve been in.”

“Yes, it is, especially when I see other accidents happening around me. But at this moment I am also feeling proud and content. I saw you all working on different things when I walked in and it left me feeling happy that what we do in here is not so much a chore, but something you might be enjoying.”

“I do enjoy it,” Brice says. “These mandalas help me feel calmer. When I get stressed, now I pull out my markers and start coloring.”

Orion chimes in, “It’s true. I see him coloring all the time.”

“Miss Lisa,” Brice asks, “did you bring in some extras?”

“Yes, remind me before I head out tonight. I have two different versions I can give you.”

“Awesome,” he whispers, head bowed while he colors contentedly.

“Who’s next to check in?” I ask.

Marcus shrugs his shoulders and says, “I’m okay.”

“You’re okay? How about you pull out your wheel and talk to me?”

He shuffles his papers. He looks worn, beaten down. “I’m okay, tired, but I’m okay.”

Not wanting to press him, I say, “Alright, we’ll leave it at that.”

Orion is his usual chipper self. “Test subject number six. First I have a question, does that microphone really pick up our conversations?”

I am caught off guard. Most times, I forget there’s a microphone in the room. “Yes, Orion, it does.”

“Do you listen to this when you’re at home?”

“I have not gone through and listened to everything, but I have listened to a bit of each



session to make sure the recording device is working properly.” I wonder if he’s worried about something he’s said in here.

He settles back into his chair and continues, “I would have thought that it wouldn't hear all of us. Okay, as usual I'm satisfied and content every day is a holiday. We really just got to be grateful no matter how our day goes. A lot of people look at me and say well, that's easy for you to say, but if I tell you about my past, you would be amazed at it. Believe me, my past is not one that most people would want to have. We've talked about death before in here. You can tell how good a person was by how many people show up to their funeral. I would hate it if the only person to show up to my funeral is the one putting up my tombstone. You want to have friends and you want to have people that turn to you and hope you have people to turn back to. I have fellowship here in this room and I'm grateful.”

I nod and say, “Your check-in made me think about how we can sit beside somebody, I do it all the time, I sit beside somebody in class, and I'm sure this happens to you all in here, most times we have no idea how much this person next to us has lived through or survived. It happens in here too. I'm always amazed at the strength and resilience it might take for some of us to get up every day, right?”

“It's true, it really is,” Brice says, looking up from coloring. “I'll go next. I'm feeling peaceful; content and peaceful.”

“Any specific reason,” I prod.

“Nope, it's just how I'm feeling.”

“Okay, thank you,” I say, then look at Flynn.

“I am proud, confident, and excited. Yesterday, my niece sent me a friend request on Facebook. We haven't talked in probably four years. She heard from my sister that I'm doing

better and wanted to check in with me. She's the closest thing I have to a kid. We're going to make plans to meet up in a few weeks."

"That's awesome. It must feel good to be in touch after all these years." I pause then continue, "I didn't realize you all have access to social media in here."

"We sure do," Flynn says. "It's how I keep up with the few family members I have left."

I don't know why I'm surprised he's using Facebook. In this moment I realize the narrow view I have of my participants' lives. Because they are surveilled in a variety of ways, I imagined there might be restrictions on internet use. I can see how Facebook use can pose risks to the men's sobriety, but I can see the benefits as well.

Talon perks up. "Yeah, I get to see pictures my parents post of my kids on Facebook. It helps me feel closer to them. But I don't post pictures back; imagine the caption, 'Here's daddy sorting through donations at the dock.'" He laughs.

Orion chimes in, "Here's daddy at his Alcoholics Anonymous meeting."

Laughter fills the room.

Talon adds, "I don't want to have to explain to them what's going on with me right now. I just want to get right, get straight, and go home to be with my kids once and for all."

"Well, you're on your way to doing just that. Is that your check in?" I ask.

"No, for my check in," he says looking at the feeling wheel, "I'm feeling sad, sad and lonely." He pats the paper, takes a deep breath, and leans back in his chair.

"Thank you for sharing," I say and leave it there, sensing he's done. I turn to face Zeke.

"I'm alright, just tired and blah."

"Okay," I say. "I feel a weird energy in the room tonight. Is something going on?"

Flynn speaks up, "Yeah, one of the guys who they caught drinking and forced to leave

the ARC a few weeks ago, we just found out he got drunk, walked out in front of a car and died.”

“Oh no,” I say shaking my head. “How did you all find out?”

“His sponsor is my sponsor. He came in and told a few of us. I was his roommate when I first got here,” Talon adds.

“Gosh, I’m so sorry to hear this.”

Marcus shakes his head and says, “It’s this disease. It doesn’t let go. With God’s help I’m going to break free of its hold on me.”

I venture, “What does hearing this news do to the rest of you?”

“It makes me fight harder,” Brice says. “Since I’m still here, I want to make it count.”

“I feel real lucky that I’m not six feet under,” Orion adds. “That time I was hit by a car, I know it was kind of on purpose. I wasn’t sure I still wanted to be here but I wasn’t ready to buy a gun or anything like that.”

“It breaks my heart,” Flynn says. “He was a real good guy. He was battling demons.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I say to the room. “It is heartbreaking.”

“I didn’t really know him, but I feel like that could be any one of us,” Zeke says.

“You all are here now, fighting for your lives,” I say. “It makes me feel hopeful.”

Talon asks if he can talk about something that has nothing to do with tonight’s topic and the guys all nod. I say, “Sure!”

Talon starts, “I’m talking to this girl, and I’m trying to get over thinking that I can sustain a relationship when I can barely take care of myself most of the time. I’m trying to get over that. I just get jealous when I see other people doing it, but then I realize they don’t know what the hell they are putting themselves through because it never really works out when you only have a few months sober and you’re trying to get to an emotional relationship with somebody else. You

barely have your own emotions in control so I just kind of, I'm a little antsy, a little lonely, I don't know what to do in this situation, because I've never, I would either use, or I would blow it off, and it would get worse, so I'm just taking it one day at a time.”

“You are tasked with doing something different than what you've done before?” I ask.

“Mhmm.”

I continue, “That's amazing and hard. We are human and need affection. We need other people so it's hard to cut that off, even knowing that it might not be good for us or knowing that it might not be in our best interest, right? I'm just going to throw this question out there. You don't need to answer it. How many of you struggle with loneliness?”

Flynn takes a deep breath and says, “We have these papers we take to outside meetings and we need to have them signed as proof we attended. One of the questions is, ‘what did you learn from this this group or this meeting?’ I don't think they really read what we write.”

I clarify, “You get credit for those meetings like you get credit for attending this group?”

“Yes. What I wrote for ‘what did you learn’ because Talon just made me think about it. I usually don't think about it at all, but I wrote that I'm in my fifties and the girls at this meeting are so young they could be a daughter to me. I feel really old. I'm thinking I need female companionship but I have no idea how to approach a situation as far as dating or even just talking to a woman. I'm this old, worn out, fifty-something-year-old dude and I don't know what I am going to do at this point in my life.” He pauses and raps his knuckles on the table. “Maybe once I have some clean time under my belt, I'll feel more confident.”

Talon nods. “Yeah, when I was active in my addiction, I was very manipulative and could con my way into any situation. I could easily talk to any woman. But sober, my insecurities are very deep.”

Flynn crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, “Yep, that's part of it.”

Marcus shakes his head and says, “I’m glad I don’t have to worry about dating.”

Brice joins in the conversation. “I have no idea how to approach a woman either. I get very nervous, it's like I'm in middle school, especially at the A.A. meetings. I like to think they're feeling the same way too. I imagine we are all struggling. We've been numbing this feeling for so long. There are a lot of fronts that people put up and when a woman puts up a front, it is so intimidating. I feel like I can't even go near her. I feel like she’s going to make me cry because the rejection is going to be too intense for me to handle. It's a weird place to be for me, like you said, when you're out, drinking and hanging out at a bar whatever, it's so much easier.”

The table gets quiet for a moment and I ask, “What if you took the ‘accept’ and ‘reject’ parts out of it? What if it was just about having a conversation?”

Talon perks up, “That's why I go to church. I'm so much more comfortable in church because when I talk about Jesus to somebody, I don't see a woman or a man. I see a child of God. I talk to somebody and we're talking about the same things. It's motivating and encouraging.”

“That seems to be the trick or secret, being on the same page. You don’t feel like that’s happening in meetings?” I ask.

“Going to A.A. is motivating and encouraging but they're talking about worldly things like Starbucks,” Talon laughs. “They talk about things I have separated myself from since I've been here. I stopped listening to music for a while. I got deep into my relationship with Jesus and I let him guide me. I would ask him before I did everything. It's like I'm on the outside looking in on the worldly stuff because I'm not really prepared yet. I'm only a few months sober. I don't want to get cocky and think I can be a normal person again, because I can't. I will never be normal. I have a disease that I will have to treat throughout my life.”

I nod, “Yes, you have to constantly be aware.”

He adds, “I can blend in with normal people but I have to accept I will never be this guy who can have a couple drinks and then go home.”

“May I ask you a question, Talon?” I say.

“Sure.”

“Can you take those ‘inside church’ eyes and ears and use them in the world? Do you see what I’m saying? It sounds like A.A. meetings are the perfect time to start practicing and experiencing more of the real world because you can’t separate yourself from the world. Maybe you can use those moments to practice interacting with women without expectations, knowing you are not in the place and time in your life to start a relationship.”

“I guess I’m just not good at introductions, at least not sober ones. I’m done now,” Talon laughs and looks straight at me.

“Did you get everything out that you wanted to say?”

“Probably twice as much,” he says, as he picks up a marker and doodles on his notebook.

Laughter fills the room.

Marcus surprises me when he joins the conversation, “We have the tendency as humans to deal with everything in the flesh. We forget to deal with the whole picture. Jesus was a human, but he dealt with things with the spirit. This is why the word says we are of the spirit and not of the flesh; although you are in the world, be not of the world. If you allow God’s spirit to enter you and we allow the spirit to operate through us, we are able to deal with things differently. I choose to allow God to change me. You cannot change anything about you. You can only have the desire and the will to do these things and then allow God to do the process, and he only does it little by little on a daily basis. God’s not fixin’ to fix anything today for tomorrow; he’s going

to fix what needs to be fixed today little by little.”

I hear ooh’s, ah’s, and voices from around the table say, “Amen, amen.”

“Thank you for those wise words, Marcus,” I say and smile.

He nods and adds, “You know, we are like garbage cans and we go through life collecting bits and pieces of trash. We’ve got to clean out the loose bits by talking to others, telling these stories, clean it enough so then God can come and scrape out the rest of the junk that sticks to the bottom, the stuff we can’t clean out ourselves. Once all that’s done, we’ll find out, we’re not really garbage cans, we’re vessels.”

“Wow, fantastic visual for what you see happening. That is amazing. I love it. Comparing us to trash cans and how life experiences leave behind gunk we need help to clean out.” I am probably staring wide-eyed at him. I am impressed and amazed by his conceptualization for the work he is doing at The Salvation Army and in our group. Goldberg’s (2005) work pops into my head. We live our lives in story form, it’s how we make sense of what happens to us, we start a story and it unfolds. The story changes over time. There’s no hope to change your story if you never get it out, write it down, examine it, and rewrite it.

“I’d like to add a few thoughts about storytelling,” I say. “We tell stories in different ways to different people, to our friends in one way, to parents another, to siblings, to our bosses. Think about the details we share with a friend, maybe make the story funny, but how we leave details out to avoid worrying a parent. Storytelling is how we make sense of our lives. Stories serve purposes. A child who has been abused can use the story of abuse as a way to keep themselves from being hurt again. But later in life, that story can keep the grown version of this person from connecting with others.

“When we tell our stories in exactly the same way over and over, not changing any of the

details to take into account new information we might have or new ways we see and interact with the world, we keep ourselves stuck. We leave no room for contemplation and reflection. Telling stories to others, out loud, and inviting comments and questions, we have the chance to see our stories in new ways. There's healing in the telling of your story and healing in being heard.

“Finally, if we refuse to tell the painful, traumatizing stories, and pretend they never happened, they can come back to haunt us later in life. I think of an untold story of pain and trauma like a wound or cut. If you don't clean it out first and instead quickly cover up with a band aid, it festers, gets infected and swollen, poisoning the area. An untold story of pain and trauma can fester in your mind, poisoning your thoughts, attitude, and emotional state. We cannot ignore or pretend the pain away and until we start to tell our stories, we cannot hope to change our stories. We have to get them out, write them down, examine them, and rewrite them.”

Flynn says, “You're exactly right. For most of my life, I put up a wall and pretended like the stabbing never happened. You said at different times we tell different stories. Telling you all that story, taking responsibility, was the first time I've ever thought, ‘thank God that man stabbed me because he probably saved his family's life.’ He defended his house. I would have never said that before being with you all. I always wanted to cast it on him. How dare he do that to me? But I was the one who went kicking in his door. Retelling the story helped me face and write down the actual truth. Telling this story here helped me get out my part of this story so I could get closure.”

“I am happy you had a chance to revisit and retell that story. It must feel good,” I say.

“It sure does.”

“Thank you all for sharing your feelings and thoughts on relationships and for being open to telling stories you've never told and finding new ways of telling old stories.” I change tone



and direction, “I’d like to introduce today’s activity. You don’t have to turn this in and you don’t have to share unless you want. Open up your journals and write a thank-you note to someone who you’ve never had the chance to thank.”

“Do they have to be a real person?” Brice asks.

“Well, yes, I’d prefer it was a real person who...”

“Do they have to be alive?” Talon interrupts.

“No, they can be living or dead, someone who made a difference in your lives. I’ll tell you a story about the first time we did this activity in group. You know I like to participate so I sat here like you now, bewildered and wondering who I’d write my note to, then it hit me. I had an English teacher in eleventh grade, Mr. Puopolo. He encouraged my writing. He edited, gave good feedback, and told me I had a talent for writing. I am not sure I’d be here today, be striving to get a degree that centers around writing and storytelling, if I’d not been encouraged by him.”

“That’s cool,” Orion says.

“Wait, I didn’t get to the best part of this story. I hadn’t thought of this man in decades but I sat here in this room last year and wrote him a letter of thanks. About a week later, his picture and name popped up in the ‘people you may know’ on Facebook.”

Flynn bursts out, “Wow!”

“Right?! I thought, ‘what are the chances.’ So, I sent him a Facebook message.

Mr. Puopolo! I was a student in your class about 35 years ago...yikes! It was an English class, I think, that you taught. Your class gave me a chance to be creative and your feedback was always so encouraging. I am a PhD student currently, studying communication at USF in Tampa, FL. I feel as though my writing life began when I was in your class. I always wanted to have the chance to say "thank you" and now I do...so, THANK YOU!!”

“Did he answer?” Flynn asked.

“He sure did! He told me he remembered me well, thanked me for the note, and said he appreciated me reaching out. I feel by being thankful, I somehow brought about a chance to share my gratitude, like I manifested the opportunity. Even if he hadn’t popped up on Facebook, I had a chance to evaluate another moment in time that brought me to this point here, today.”

“That’s a great story,” Brice says.

“Does this give you an idea of what I am asking you to do?”

“Yep,” Orion says, already writing in his notebook.

We spend a few minutes in silence and deep thought. As they begin to put pens down and look around, I say, “Just a few more moments, then we’ll see who wants to share.”

Orion looks at me, points at his paper, and raises his eyebrows to indicate he’s ready.

I nod, holding up my index finger to ask for another minute.

When it looks like the rest are wrapping up, I point to Orion and say, “Start us off.”

Orion clears his throat and begins, “I’m writing to a guy I used to drink with out on the streets. I spent time in DACCO with him. He was the first person I saw in here on my first day. I was amazed to see him. He was happy to see me and told me how great it is here and that he’d been clean for six months already. That reset my whole outlook in here, switched my whole mindset, and helped prepare me to be successful.”

“Nice, did you have a chance to tell him?”

Orion snaps his notebook closed. “No, but I will if I see him again.”

It’s strange that he wrote about what he’d say but didn’t actually write the thank you note. Maybe I didn’t explain this activity properly. “Okay, who’d like to go next?”

Talon says he’d like to go next and begins, “In writing this, I realized there’s a

whole...this isn't a big enough piece of paper. I have so many reasons to be grateful to this person. I did not realize before this activity how much I owe him, how thankful I am for so many things. This is the gist of it. 'Dear Findley, I remember those nights spent at your house like it was yesterday. You really helped me overcome my fear of swimming. You were like a father to me. I know why my parents chose you to be my godfather. I've used lessons that you taught me every day of my life. You taught me to be silent, strong, and observant. Thank you.'"

"That was beautiful," I say to Talon.

"I really liked this activity. I feel better after having done this. It got a lot deeper than I thought. I was worried I couldn't think of anybody I'm grateful to or grateful for then it hit me."

"Thinking about things we're grateful for helps change our focus and improves our mood," I say.

"Lisa," Flynn says. "Everything in this class coincides with the steps that I'm doing. I'm working on Step Ten and it talks about having a gratitude for blessings received. You, all in this room and you too, Lisa, you have helped me and I'm thankful. You have helped me realize that it's all or nothing. The draw to use drugs or drink is powerful out there. Even in here, the draw, it's always there; it's always in the back of my mind. It wasn't long ago all I cared about was copping some stuff off my dude or getting my next bottle. I didn't see what was so bad about that life. Flash forward so many years and I'm in rehab. The reality of it is, wow, I really did this to myself. It cost me pretty much everything.

"I didn't recognize it at the time but with all the possessions I lost, I lost the bit of respect I had for myself. I appreciate all of you because you helped me open up. Having these in-depth conversations, they really get all of the stuff off my chest and out of my head. It triggers different thoughts at different times that are just random. I catch myself thinking about what you said; you

know what each of you have said. It'll cause me to think about things in a different light and different ways, really helpful. I'm going to miss this class, I really am."

Orion says, "Me too, we were just talking about that."

Talon is nodding and joins the conversation. "I recognize it too. I remember maybe about the third week in, and we were writing and I was having some issues with the material that we were given. I talked it over with my counselor and I was ready to drop out. I felt like I just couldn't do it, but I realized it kind of works along with my steps. Being here, learning what we're learning, writing about these topics goes along with the work I'm doing with my sponsor. You know, the fourth step, taking an inventory, the resentments, getting them on paper, and listing people. It went along with some of the material that you brought to the class, so it really did help. And, I would say since learning about my old roommate passing away, I have not had an urge or an obsession to drink at all."

"Oh, Talon, that's great," I say.

"Yeah, I was going through like a month and a half of some serious anxiety, depression, wanting to drink, not caring; it was crazy. But in the last week, I have had a clearer head. Drinking has not crossed my mind one time, even though I'm looking at this Coors Light sign."

I glance out the window and shake my head. The trees that once obscured the billboard advertising Coors Light beer have been trimmed and the sign is now visible. Worse, it seems extra bright, demanding to be noticed. The men do not even have to leave the property to be seduced by alcohol. "I cannot believe that sign," I say.

Talon adds, "It feels good to not have that obsession to drink. It's a load off."

I am amazed by their feedback. "You've all said some really important things I want to highlight and point to right now. If we don't get together and share stories, there's no way for you

to know that other people understand your story. There's no way for you to explore your story from a different view point. You sit and that story festers inside of you with only your perspective. That is one of the main reasons for this group, for us to share stories, and to hear somebody else's perspective on our stories.

“Also, it is in the telling and listening we are reminded of other stories, stories that we haven't thought about in a long time. We, and especially for you as men, it is hard for us to connect and share and be vulnerable and open like you are doing here. You are doing the work of being vulnerable and connecting and relating to others. When you leave, remember you need a circle of friends you can share stories with, because if you don't, you spiral in your own thoughts.” *I need to take my own advice and cultivate a new circle of friends.*

I sit back and take a breath. The men are nodding and smiling, taking it in.

“Okay, who has not gone yet? Marcus?”

“I'm still working on mine. I've already told you all I am grateful for my wife who has stuck with me all these years. I am going to finish up what I want to say, write it in a card, and give it to her next week.”

“Oh, that's a wonderful plan,” I say. “Brice, do you want to share?”

“Yeah, I'll tell you who I'm writing to and what I'm writing about but I didn't finish yet. I thought I was done thinking about this. I am thanking my best friend, the one who found me. I hated him at first. I was so mad he found me before I could actually die. It took a little while to see he saved me for a reason. I'm not finished with whatever God's plan is for me. I need to still be here. Today, I am thankful and I really do want to tell him.”

“Thank you so much, Brice. Zeke, do you have anything for us?”

“Pass.”

“Okay, pass. Thank you,” I say. “Next, I’ll hand out your final reflection paper. This one is about good goodbyes. Take one and pass them around. You’ll see there are a few quotes about goodbyes, like this one by an unknown author: ‘why does it take a minute to say hello and forever to say goodbye?’ The next one is by George Lansdowne: ‘to die and part is a less evil; but to part and live, there, there is the torment.’”

“Wow,” Flynn interrupts, “That is powerful and so true.”

“What are you reading into his words?” I ask.

“I think he’s saying that if we say goodbye to someone who dies, we’re sad, but they’re gone. We don’t have to worry about bumping into them somewhere. Saying goodbye to someone who’s alive because of a break-up or fight, they are out there, somewhere in the world, separated from you. That’s more hurtful. It’s like he says, ‘torment.’”

“Yes, I agree, that’s what I think he’s saying too.” I continue with the directions, “Read through the other quotes. There are a lot of questions here, but the bottom line is that I would like for you each to write a goodbye letter to somebody you never had the chance to say goodbye to. Sometimes goodbyes are very difficult, they arise out of being kicked out, divorced, moving, switching jobs.”

“They don't have to be dead?” Orion asks.

“No. They might be dead and that’s why you didn’t have a chance to say goodbye, but they might be alive and you’ve not had the chance for closure. Goodbyes can be painful especially if you didn’t have time to prepare for them. Next week, we are going to say goodbye to group and each other as we relate to each other in this group context; it’s a goodbye that we’ve been preparing for from the beginning. We knew it would only be twelve weeks, we knew we had a mission and a goal together, and now we will be saying goodbye.

“I think of this as a ‘good’ goodbye. Like at the end of a good book, you know it ends. You’re sad but you’re okay because you can pick up a new book. Or, like the end of a great movie. We watch a movie and know it’s going to end but we know we can watch another one. I think of the goodbyes that we plan for as ‘good’ goodbyes because we know the end is coming. We know the relationship served a purpose and it was a good purpose. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” Brice answers. “I’m still going to be sad.”

“Me too,” I say. “I will definitely be sad as well. I am not pretending you won’t be sad after a good goodbye, but it’ll be a fulfilled and satisfied sad, not an empty, longing, broken sadness. I think about those relationships, the good ones that we end up having to say goodbye in, they set us up to know what a good relationship is like, what to look for next, a chance to examine what we did to foster the friendship, this relationship. So yes, if you will think of somebody you want to say goodbye to that you did not have the chance to do so, for whatever the reasons, write that letter here for next week’s session.”

“What if we don’t say goodbye to anyone?” Orion asks.

“What do you mean?” I tilt my head and say.

“I don’t like to say goodbye, it feels so final. I’m more like a ‘see you later’ kind of guy.”

“Well, just write about someone you thought you’d see again but didn’t, or anything you can think of to say on the topic. I’ll give you an example. I would write to my mom’s best friend. She’s the one I did my prayer, hope, and gratitude card for. About four years ago, we got together for Christmas like we always did but she was behaving strangely. She was reminiscing and saying things she remembered from when I was a baby and the very first time she ever saw me. I hugged her and she hugged me, and then she lingered with her hug, which was not the norm. A few weeks later, I saw her again and she told me the same stories again, reminiscing.

Looking back, I feel like she knew she was dying and was saying goodbye. I didn't know she was dying; I didn't know what was happening. I love this woman and didn't understand what was happening and then she died. We gathered for Christmas with her and at Easter we got together to memorialize her because she was gone. Had I known, had I stopped and thought more about it, maybe I could have told her that I loved her, how important she was in my life, and said goodbye to her. She is the person I will write to and say goodbye.”

“What did she die from?” Brice asks.

“Alcoholism. She opened a wine shop years earlier and I never saw her without a champagne glass in her hand after. I noticed she seemed a bit puffy at Christmas.”

The men nod and tell me that’s what happens after your liver stops working properly.

“I didn’t realize it was a symptom of alcoholism. A few weeks after Christmas, she passed out at home and was rushed to the ER. She never regained consciousness.”

Zeke shakes his head, “An all too familiar story ‘round these parts.”

Flynn says, “I’m real sorry to hear about your aunt.”

“Thank you for listening to my story, guys.”

Orion asks, “Now when you get done with this and you get your cap and gown, are you going to be doing this kind of work or are you going to work for USF?”

“I want to do stuff like this, run groups.”

“Here at The Salvation Army?”

“Maybe here or in adolescent prison systems like I mentioned in a previous meeting. Or, with veterans. I’d like to teach as well, just not sure where,” I say.

“That’s cool,” Orion says.

“I’d have to create different prompts because there would be different stories, but I think



a journaling and storytelling group is something that anybody who's struggling, who's lived a life filled with trials and tribulations, would benefit from. Why do you ask?"

He continues, "I was just wondering what you were going to do with the information you're gathering while you run our groups."

"I am hoping to use what I learn here, what you all are teaching me, to do this kind of work. I think it's helpful and important. You're all playing a part in whatever it is that comes out of our time together. What do you think about that?"

"I think it's cool," Orion says nodding.

"Alright gentlemen. Now that you know what's due next week, let's check out what you have for me this week. You wrote letters to your younger selves."

Marcus speaks up, "Let me say now, this really didn't make much sense to me. I couldn't think of anything to write. I don't know if the younger me would have read a letter that I wrote to him. I don't know what I would have said to him. I don't feel like he had control over his life or that he would have the chance to do something different. I have control now. I can focus on today and doing things differently today and being the man I know God wants me to be."

"This is perfect Marcus. You know yourself and what works for you. Thank you!"

"Well, you're welcome but I don't know why you're thanking me."

"I am thanking you for showing the different ways we can think about these prompts and assignments. I am thanking you for taking care of yourself," I say, thinking how much he continually amazes me.

"Okay," he says and laughs.

"Who's next?" I ask.

Brice motions he wants to go next. He begins to read, "Hey dodo, this is you, there will

be a lot of things you think you want to do. Take it from me, take time and think them through. The lying and stealing have to go. If you're patient and honest you'll get what you need and you will appreciate it all a lot more. I know you feel hurt and angry, but learn to love yourself. All your relationships will fail if you don't and love will be like an unread book kept on a shelf. Mom loves you so much and would do anything for you. Don't hurt her. You are going to make some wrong choices and many mistakes. Don't ever give up, keep the faith, you're a survivor and you've got what it takes. Things are going to get pretty dark. Don't give up. Talk to someone, tell them what you're thinking and feeling. It might help you cope with the pain you are feeling. P.S. You are not a dodo; I just wanted to get your attention. You're actually pretty smart!"

"Wow, Brice, I really like the line that love is like an unread book on a shelf," I say.

"Yeah, man," Orion says, "that's really cool! Can I go next?"

"Sure!"

"Here goes. I write this letter to you so you will listen to what I have to say. Be a man and do the things in life you were meant to do. Don't let alcohol ruin your life. Girls will always be there. Be something in life. Don't worry what other people think of you. Be a strong boy and become a stronger man. Life will throw you a bunch of curveballs. Be ready for what comes your way. Be faithful and thankful."

"Thank you, Orion," I say, taking notice his letter mentions nothing specific from his childhood or from his life and he hasn't included any details or feelings. "Okay. Who's next?"

Flynn says, "I'll go." He clears his throat and begins. "Hey there, I know you will find this hard to take but your life isn't going to turn out the way you planned. So much wasted talent and time. You should have listened to the coach and applied yourself more. By the time you're twenty-five, alcohol and drugs will be the main focus of your life. Never mind that you got shot

on account of them. Depression will set in and you will feel like your life is no good. By thirty you will have drunk yourself out of the best job you've ever had and friends will be few and far between. You won't have any of your own kids because you've been drinking up the supposed good life. Feelings of uselessness and self-pity will lead you to thoughts of suicide. Due to drinking and stress you're going to almost die from a heart attack. How dark it is before the dawn. Believe it or not, this is the beginning of a new life filled with hope. You will get help with these problems, you'll meet new friends and your imagination will be fired up again in a very short time. But this could have all been avoided had you listened to coach and applied yourself. It's going to be rough but there is light at the end of the tunnel.”

“Thanks for that Flynn,” I say.

Talon asks, “Should I go now?”

“Sure, go for it.”

“What’s up sport, you probably won't believe this but I am you from the future. I know life has been full of non-stop parties and playing ball. I just want to warn you your life will go to a dark place if you don't get serious about it. You won't be happy unless you do. You will live a life full of missed opportunities and bad decisions. All the confidence and the way you feel about yourself will change. You won't be able to live your life on natural ability and talent. You need to work hard and do what's right in order to have the life you want.” He looks up and says, “That’s all I have for now. I’m not really done.”

“It’s a good start,” I encourage. “Thank you. Okay, Zeke. Are you willing to share?”

“Sure. I wrote to the nineteen-year-old me. That’s when I feel everything took a turn for the worse. Here goes. Hey Soldier, go ahead and put your helmet on and spit the dip out. It’s about to make you sick from all the burpees you are about to be ordered to do because you have

your helmet off. It's all good now but it's not going to be so good in five minutes. Look kid, I know it's tough being this young and this far away from home for reasons you can't quite explain. Open the letters and actually read them. They help. Maybe even return some letters. You'd be surprised at the joy you get from mail call.

“I know you look up to the guys in your unit, big bad soldiers, they are jokes and frauds. They're using skills, knowledge and resources for the wrong reasons and self-gain. You're going to do this too. I need you to not do this. It will lead you down a road that's going to be hard to return from. It's going to cost you a lot and I know you might not care about it now, but you will. You think that it can't get any worse over there. Let me tell you kid, it can, and it does. You are fighting uphill with no ammo. You might be fighting over there but the war is in here, and buddy you are about to kick your own ass. You are the enemy you need to be fighting. When you get in that truck and take that shit from Phil, you end up on a road that brings years of drug addiction, problems in your marriage, and missing out on time with your kid. That's right, we have a kid. You're going to be a father hotshot. Keep your shit together and come home in one piece.”

“Thank you so much, Zeke. You include so much detail and great advice for the nineteen-year-old version of you.” I pause. “I don't remember hearing much about your military service before now.”

“Yeah, I don't like to think about it. Something happened over there. One of my friends died and I feel responsible. I try to think about that time as little as possible.”

“Have you mentioned this to your counselor?” I ask.

“I've mentioned it. I haven't told her the whole story though.”

“When you're ready to, when you feel strong enough, that's not what I mean, when you feel far enough away from it to face it, I think it might help, to talk it over with someone,” I say.

“I remember mentioning this a few weeks ago. There’s a trick to writing something that is still too painful to face. You know how we all tell our stories from first-person perspective?”

“What do you mean?” Orion asks.

“We say things like ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘us’ and ‘we’ when we talk about things we did, or saw, or that happened to us. That’s called first-person. Second-person is when we put the story onto our audience and we tell stories that include the ‘you’ who is listening or reading. Well, third-person is when we tell a story as if it happened to someone else. ‘He’ did this and ‘she’ said that; the action happens to someone else, not ‘me’ or ‘you.’ It seems to make it easier to tell those awful stories, the ones that are just too painful to think about let alone speak about. Does this make sense to you all?”

“Sure does,” Flynn answers.

“When you’re ready Zeke, writing in third-person might be something to try out,” I say.

“It sounds interesting. I’ll think about it.”

“Thanks for hearing me out, gentlemen. We just have a few minutes left. How would you all like to wrap up? We can say a one word check out, take deep breaths together, use the Blob Tree or feeling wheel...”

“Let’s do deep breathing,” Flynn says jumping from his seat. “That helped me.”

“Sounds good,” the rest chime in and stand.

“I can’t take no deep breaths,” Marcus complains. “It hurts my chest.”

“Definitely do not hurt yourself. Let’s try breathing more slowly instead of more deeply. See if that feels better,” I say and look at Marcus.

After we take five slow breaths together, I remind the men that next week will be our last. I ask them to write down the kinds of pizza they prefer so I can order what they like for our final

meeting. Their faces light up. Most say it won't matter, but I ask them to write down their choices anyway. Before I pack up, I pull out a few new packets of mandalas and hand one to Brice. I put the rest on the table and let the guys know they can take what they need.

As I pack up to head out, I find another gift mandala, probably from Brice:



**Figure 13.** Mandala left on the table for me

When I get home, I find my son on the couch playing video games. Used paper plates, candy wrappers, and empty LaCroix cans litter the coffee table. He's sipping on a bottle of beer.

"Hey sweetie," I say.

"Hey, Mama."

"How's your day been?" I ask.

"Good. I'm just relaxing. I was off today."

I don't think he's left the couch all day. I know we'll have to talk about this soon; I do not have the energy now. "Try to get some rest," I tell him as I head to my bedroom to unwind.

"I will. I don't have to work until noon tomorrow," he says.

I strip down and change into pajamas. It might be only be a little after eight, but it's been a long day. I think about my son. What letter might he write to the seventeen-year-old version of himself? He's not living much differently now than he was back then. Maybe the better question is what letter would I write to the seventeen-year-old version of myself? What might I do differently if I had the chance? What would I say to prove it was really me writing from the future? Knowing what I know now, what advice would I give that scared, naïve, bewildered girl?

*It's you, or rather me, writing to you (me?) in the past. You've just turned seventeen. Two years ago, our mother divorced our father. She didn't just leave him, but she left us as well. She left us and two sisters with our father who after one year sent us all to live in Canada with cousins. In that moment, we didn't realize the toll this would take on our life. All we knew is that it felt good to not be responsible for everything, for our little sisters—cooking, cleaning, laundry, packing lunches, and the headaches we suffered. Oh, those headaches.*

*Here's how you'll know it's really me from the future, something we've never told anyone else—those headaches made us want to stab an icepick into our temple to release the pressure, to relieve the pulsing, pounding, throbbing that made thinking, being, sleeping impossible. We didn't have an icepick, thank God, nor did we have that gun we fantasized about using. We didn't want to die, but we would have done almost anything to relieve the pain.*

*I don't know how the fuck you survived and turned out okay. I think you need to hear those words. Life feels crazy, no up or down, no making sense of choices you are tasked with making. You did the very best you could. You need to hear that too. While life has been a struggle and you've suffered, I honestly cannot think of anything new I would suggest you do. Any choice you make differently will result in not having your two beautiful children, a life filled with adventure, or ending up where we are today.*

*Lisa, you eventually find your way to a life you love. While it takes time, you find your way to breaking the cycle of violence and abandonment your parents suffered and then inflicted upon you. Your kids love and trust you; that's an accomplishment. They have struggles, but they know they can count on you. You hear from them every day, random calls, just to say 'hello' and 'I love you.'*

*Well, enough for now. I know I've told you nothing new. Keep being strong, loving, and trusting. You look at the world with wonder and amazement. Don't lose that quality. I think it's what helps us survive and find our way to the other side.*

It's not until I write the letter for myself, I fully see the power and importance of the activity.

Wishing we had done things differently might be detrimental to our success and well-being.

Writing the letter to the past versions of ourselves can help us come to terms with the past—the choices we made, the cards we were dealt, the paths we've chosen, and how we ended up here, where we are today. Even if we really could write a letter to our past selves, we cannot change what was done to us by our parents or those who were responsible for us.

There's healing, forgiveness, and comfort in knowing I had no control over the way others treated me and knowing I did the best I could under the circumstances I faced. I hope my participants found healing, forgiveness, and comfort in writing to their past selves as well.



**CHAPTER SEVEN:**  
**“GOOD” GOODBYES**

It's noon; time to call and order the pizza. Based on my telephone number, Papa John's knows where to deliver the pies. One thing handled. Settling into the couch, I dig through my bin of supplies and make sure I'm set for tonight. Copies of the information I'll hand out to the men? Check. Final survey forms? Check. Marked up reflection sheets? I find a couple items Lathan didn't have a chance to get back from me. Usually the guys have updates on others who wander away, but they've not seen Lathan since he left. I wonder where he is and how he's doing.

I am met by hungry faces at the door. I joke that's it's as if they do not get fed here. I laugh and they laugh. They help carry my supplies to the conference room. I let them know I've scheduled the delivery for six thirty so we can get some paperwork done before I lose them to the pizza. I hand out two final surveys, one that asks life satisfaction, and the other that asks if there are changes in what they thought journaling was about, journaling's effectiveness, and any suggestions they might have for my group moving forward.

“Hey guys, can you believe it's our final night together?” I ask.

“Twelve weeks sure flew by,” Flynn says wistfully.

“Where's the pizza again?” Orion asks.

“It's scheduled to be delivered at six thirty. I want to go ahead and get these things filled out before it gets here.”

“I see, bribing us,” he says and laughs.

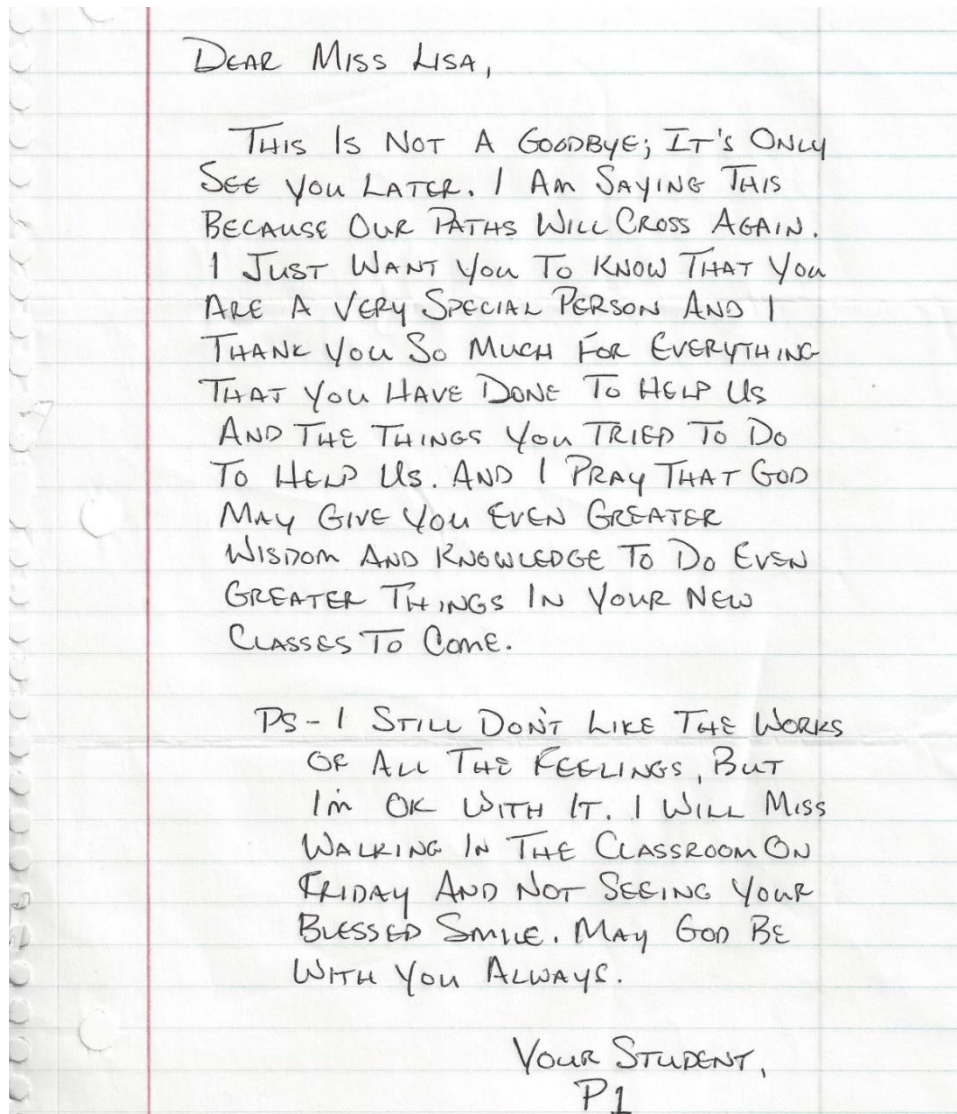
I hand out the forms and they work diligently. When they finish, I collect the feedback.

“Alright, while we wait for the pizza, let’s check in. Use the wheel since it’s our last check in together,” I direct.

“Here, this is for you.” Marcus says and hands me a folded piece of paper.

I feel a lump form in my throat.

“Go ahead, read it out loud,” he prompts.



**Figure 14.** Handwritten goodbye letter to me from a participant

I fold it and slide it into my purse. “Thank you so much, Marcus.”

“You’re welcome,” he says. “Want me to check in now?”

“Yes, that would be wonderful.”

“I’m good; I’m good.”

I laugh, “No more feelings for you, huh?”

“I’m good.”

I don’t push. “We can leave it at that.”

“Now I can get rid of my Excedrin pills,” Marcus says.

Just as the room breaks out in laughter, my phone buzzes. “Pizza’s here!”

Flynn and Talon jump up and head off to get it from the driver. I set up the ice and sodas I brought, lay out the plates and napkins, and make a space for the three pizza boxes.

Jax follows Flynn and Talon into the room and eyes the pizza, “Is this alumni night?”

The room breaks out in laughter as Talon and Flynn shoo him from the room.

Orion heads to the front of the line. “Us lab monkeys only expected a couple bananas.

Thanks for the pizza. Ooh, what kinds did you order?” he asks as he props open each box.

“I ordered based on the choices you all made last week. Half spinach alfredo and half cheese, half sausage and half meat lovers, and half barbeque Hawaiian and half pepperoni.”

Voices rise up from around the pizza boxes, “It’s about to go down!”

“No kidding, I haven’t had this kinda pizza in a long time.”

“It’s a fine choice.”

“I love sausage!”

“Mmm, spinach alfredo.”

Once everyone has slices piled on their plates and their cups are full, I ask, “How about we check in and share the goodbye stories you wrote?”

Chomping and gulping noises fill the room as the men dig in. Orion hasn't started and is looking through his reflection paper. I look his way and say, "It looks like you might want to share what you wrote before you dig in."

"Yes, I would. Test subject number six. Most of my goodbyes I never got a chance to say. My mom died when I was young and my wife just up and disappeared. Since I don't cope so well with loss, I close the door inside my head and that person just isn't..." He stops and glares down toward the other side of the table. "Are you laughing at my mom dying?"

Brice seems caught off guard. "No dude, are you crazy?"

Orion puts his paper down and says, "I don't appreciate that."

I interject, "Definitely not a laughing matter."

Brice is red and his voice quivers when he says, "You know I wouldn't laugh at that man, I wouldn't dare laugh at that."

"I know, but as I'm reading, you're laughing and..."

"I'm not laughing at you. I was laughing at something else. I'm sorry."

The table is quiet and uncomfortable. Orion looks at me and says, "I'm done."

Brice leans in and toward Orion, "Did you finish?"

"No I didn't finish, but I'm done reading it, same as being finished."

"No, go on please. I swear on my life that I was not laughing at you."

"I'm done," Orion says and hands me his paper.

"That's the danger of laughing while people are being serious and reading or sharing something vulnerable," I say.

"I know; my bad. I'm sorry," Brice says absentmindedly coloring his mandala.

I look at Orion and ask, "Do you want to say anything else whether it's on here or not?"

“I hope some people die and rot in hell but that's my own personal opinion.”

Everyone stops what they are doing and stare wide-eyed at Orion. “Whoa, okay, what does that, where did that, where does that fit into...” I stutter, unable to find words.

“I was reading something from my heart, that really, if nothing else you should say, that's too bad that guy's mom died when he was nine-years-old or something to that nature but to laugh while I'm reading is really a form of disrespect regardless...”

I finish the sentence, “Regardless of the intention.” I pause and say, “Let's take a breath.”

Brice is crying. “I'm sorry man. I feel really bad about it. I'm not that type of person to completely laugh at something else when somebody else is trying to share what's on their heart. I'm a very, I don't know what that was, I don't know where that came from, it's something that I work on to be more considerate of other people. I guess because I'm drawing and being disconnected from what's going on, I, I'm really sorry man.”

Orion softens and says, “Thank you. I appreciate it, thank you.”

I feel like I've been holding my breath. I exhale and say, “Brice, thank you. Do you have any desire to share what's on your paper?”

“No, it's okay, I appreciate everything you've done so far. I'm grateful. It's been a good experience. I put a lot of stuff on paper; I got a lot of stuff out. I was able to write creatively and explore that side of me. Thank you.”

Zeke breaks the awkwardness, “I just want to say, two things I never thought I'd enjoy but really did, were these two things,” he says shaking papers my way. “These are really cool.”

“The wheel and the Blob Tree,” I say.

“Yeah, I think they're amazing. I'll probably keep them forever.”

Talon asks, “What's this called again?”

I answer, “Plutchik’s wheel. Plutchik basically invented the wheel.”

Zeke laughs and says, “Plutchik invented the wheel.”

Laughter fills the room.

Flynn says, “I really love the poem we created together.”

I smile. “Awesome and you all have a copy of that to keep.”

Flynn continues, “I looked forward to this every week. I don't know what I'm going to do on Fridays now. I'm going to miss this. I hope I'm able to stay in touch with you.”

“I'll collect your emails before we leave the room today. If you want to work on a reflection paper you didn't have the chance to do, or go a little deeper with a story you started, I'll be happy to give you feedback. Also, I might write and ask if any of you are interested in a follow up meeting in a few months,” I say.

“I'm game for that,” Flynn says.

Talon joins in the conversation, “I'm so grateful for all the time and effort and the stuff that you put into this class. It's not really good bye; we'll always have the memories of this class. I had an opportunity and a chance to grow through this class in different ways and I appreciate you doing it. Thank you for spreading good seeds.”

At this moment, Chris, the director walks into the room and joins us for a slice.

“Hey, what's up guys?” he asks. “What do you guys think of the class?”

“I loved it. Gold star,” Orion says.

Talon adds, “When you look forward to a class that's on a Friday night, you know it's good. We barely get started and the next thing you know it's seven thirty. We thought an hour and a half would be too much, but I told my parents, ‘don't even come to visit till after seven thirty because I won't be available.’”

Orion jumps back in, “When we first started, in my journal I wrote there’s no instruction to this class, I have no idea where she's coming from, but I ended my journal twelve weeks later saying this has really been productive in more ways than I could have imagined. She forgot Cheetos one week but that's okay. I’m not going to hold it against her.”

I laugh. “I will never live that down.”

“She's good. She really gets it out of you,” Marcus says.

Zeke adds, “We're tapping into a side we didn't know we had.”

Marcus holds up a pile of papers for Chris to see. “I was able to focus. I’ve never colored that neat and stacks and stacks of feelings,” he says as he drops the pile on the table. “Honest feelings. The thing that I found out is that I hated dealing with feelings. The flipside of it was because I hated it so much, honesty came out of me. I actually wrote what I really felt.”

Chris is smiling. “You found an outlet for you, Marcus. That’s good.” He lifts the paper plate with the pizza, thanks us, and heads back out the door.

I eat one slice, my limit, and sip on my soda. I dig through my stack of papers and find a densely packed two page document. “While you eat, I’m going to pass this around. I’ve compiled quotes out of Viktor Frankl's (1984) book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Appendix A4(g)). If you haven’t read it, I highly recommend you do. Frankl was a Holocaust survivor who wrote about his experiences in a concentration camp. Here’s one of my favorite quotes: ‘Those who have a why to live, can bear with almost any how.’ For me, this says if your life has purpose and meaning you can learn to deal with almost any circumstance.

“He would tell story after story about people with him in the camps. Those who fought to survive because they knew somebody they loved was out in the world, somewhere, managed to hang on for longer than those who did not. Like a husband knowing his wife was out there; the

minute he heard she died, he would give up and die too. We need to have a reason to survive. Survival is more than just food and water. It's this will inside of us, this desire.”

Marcus says, “It's a spirit inside of you.”

“Yes, a spirit, a drive. If we can all find a reason to push on, we can deal with whatever crap comes our way. Here’s another one: ‘When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.’”

Flynn says, “Hey, that’s almost verbatim to a quote from the big book, ‘I need to focus not so much on what's wrong with the world, but what's wrong with me.’”

“Yes. Awesome. Basically the same thing. How about this quote: ‘Everything can be taken from a man but one thing, the last of the human freedoms, to choose your attitude in any set of given circumstances.’ Have you ever seen people with nothing who are happy and others with everything who are miserable?”

Voices rise up, “Sure, yes.”

I continue, “I went through his book and picked as many quotes as I could for you.”

Flynn scans the front, flips the paper over, and says, “I think this one is awesome: ‘The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of trick learned while mastering the art of living.’ I need to laugh and have a good time.”

“Otherwise, what’s the point, right?” I ask.

“Exactly. What is the point? I've lived miserable for so long, now I'm having fun. Here’s another one I really like: life is never unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose. If you have meaning and purpose in your life, then you can be happy. And for a long time I didn't have purpose, nothing meant anything,” Flynn says.

“Nice,” I say. “Whose responsibility is it to give us meaning and purpose?”



I hold my pause, then say, "It's up to us."

Flynn laughs and says, "Exactly, I was hoping that's what you were going to say. Can't nobody do that for me but me."

I nod. "Right, we have to figure it out for ourselves. So hang on to this, and if you ever have a chance to get the book, it's tiny and totally readable. It's filled with stories of survival and hope in one of the most unbearable and horrific times in history."

I look around and see most are on their second serving but winding down. I'll keep talking. "Okay guys, I'm going to go around the room and say something about each of you, starting with Marcus."

I turn to face him and continue, "Marcus, you have an ability to express yourself in this fabulous way that is almost preacher like. It comes out of you with a power and a force and knowledge and a confidence and it's amazing. First you resist, then you accept and embrace, and then you take us home with some kind of a comment or revelation. It's amazing, thank you."

He rubs his hands together and smiles. "I was just hoping you'd leave me alone."

Laughter fills the room.

"Orion. The stories you've shared with us have been incredibly powerful and mind-boggling to me. The strength you have to still be here today and to have a hopeful, grateful outlook on life is amazing. Somehow you almost always are able to say 'I'm living a good life today.' Your gratefulness helps me. When I'm having a bad moment I remember there's so much good going on and so much out there for me to feel grateful for."

"Thank you, Lisa," he says.

"Brice, I was a little worried. I thought you didn't want to be here. I was hoping we'd get to work a little together and you stuck it out. You are a loving, happy, passionate person. You are

visual, creative, and the way that you take things, you take things to heart. You take your work to heart, this group to heart, friendships to heart, you are connected and you take your recovery to heart, and it's been beautiful to watch”

Brice glances up from drawing and smiles. “Thank you.”

“Flynn, you’ve participated from the beginning. You're very open and share your pain. You set a tone for us, an example, of how deep people can go if they choose to, and you did that. I've almost felt like you've been a co-leader, a co-facilitator. I said this to you before. You’ve set an example of how to dig in and do the work and it's very exciting for me. It shows the healing that can come out of this process. I want to thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome,” Flynn says proudly.

“Zeke, I was a little worried we were going to lose you near the beginning. You were so honest about how hard it was to stay in here when you felt your family needed you out there. I feel like you've opened up and grown a little through this process. I've seen a change in you. Thank you for trusting me, the guys, and the work, and giving it your all. I’m glad you stayed.”

“I'm glad I did too. I was in a tight shell when I got here, and I probably would still be in that shell if it wasn't for this class. This has been an outlet for me.”

“That’s awesome, thank you,” I say.

“Last but not least, Talon. You have continually done exactly what you needed to do. You're actively participating. You are so young. It has been a really wonderful lesson for me in not judging. I have been pleasantly surprised, ecstatic actually. My hope is to make a difference at all levels. That you're so young, and this might be it for you, that rehab might take after one round at such a young age would be a wonderful thing. I am hopeful and happy for you that you are where you are and that you've done what you've done and that I've been able to learn from

you. I want to say thank you; thank you for sticking it out and doing all you did.”

“You’re welcome,” Talon says.

“I don’t know the struggle of the journey to sobriety. I have struggled on other journeys and paths. I’ve found when I have a creative outlet, ways to express myself creatively, the struggles I face begin to pale and aren’t so overwhelming or menacing. I hope you’ve found tools in this class that allow you to find a sense of peace, tools you’ll be able to use to focus on creating instead of focusing on the pain or problems that seem to loom ahead.”

Flynn chokes up a bit and says, “Lisa, I wanted to thank you personally. I wanted to play the man card at first and say this class wasn't really for me. This has been the first time in my life I've had my mind made up that I wasn't going to do something, that I wasn't interested in something. My counselor asked me to be open-minded and to try it and let me know I could quit if I wanted to. Because I was open-minded, I didn't miss out on a huge opportunity to participate in this class. We were all friends before we met you, but we're really friends now. We look forward to seeing each other and saying ‘Hey, Lisa is coming.’ It's grown over 3 months into a friendship where we look forward to being together and having this time to share together. It's been a huge help for me.”

I am thrilled. “Wonderful, Flynn. What you just said leads me perfectly into one of the things I want to share with you all on our last day together. Becoming friends can happen through sharing ideas and stories and goals and aspirations. That's one of the ways to build friendships. I found this paper online and at first it might seem silly to you all, but it's a self-help guide to making and keeping friends. Take one packet each and send the rest around the table. The reason I thought it was important is because through our experiences here in group, we learned what it feels to meet like-minded people and become invested in each other. This

document talks about the things you can look for in a person which would make them a good friend. What do you do and how do you behave that makes you a good friend?"

Flynn says, "It not silly. I can't wait to read it. Here it says, 'Through volunteering we can make friends.' Oh, I agree with this."

"Right? This document plays very nicely into what you were just saying Flynn."

"You'd think I knew what you were about to show us wouldn't you," Flynn laughs.

"As I read through the ten pages at home, I thought about addiction and recovery. When getting high was the objective, you'd hang out with people who are also addicted. Friendships form out of like-minded activities. When you want to stay sober and you don't want to dive back into that life, you have to find friends who do the things you want to start doing."

"Lisa, you were more than an instructor, you were a friend to us and you participated from the very first class we had together," Orion says.

"Thank you. I knew it would be important for me to open up and share personal stories with you to set the tone. And, you all made it easy for me to share my stories with you."

Talon says, "It's not just that you shared stories. I think you are an amazing listener. You have this thing about you that shows you're captivated by the things people say. You're able to cross-examine what we say in a positive way and understand where we are coming from. You have an immense empathy. Even though you might not have been through what we have been through, you show that you can understand our pain because of whatever emotion that you've been through in your life. You're able to identify with us, which is pretty epic because we're addicts and we've been through some trauma in our lives. You show a compassion for what people feel, for what they believe in, and you don't, you're not the kind of person who says 'no, that's wrong.' You try to come to a certain agreement with what's going on, a compromise, but

it's mostly out of love, which is something that is amazing. I believe this is what Christianity is about, to show love and not reproof in correction. You have a knack for doing that and it's awesome. Thank you. Keep it up.”

Brice adds, “Yeah, sometimes you do that with just an expression on your face. When you look at us, about things we've said, that's all it took sometimes. You could see it in your face

I am overwhelmed. “Thank you, guys. This means so much to me.”

Brice continues, “I probably wouldn't have gotten to know half of you guys without this class, probably none of you, if it weren't for this class. That alone makes taking this class worth it. To get to know things about all of you guys, it's amazing. I think about it as we walk through the hallways and nod at each other in acknowledgement. I can see others wondering ‘how do you know this guy.’ It’s like an inside secret. Journaling. We nod at each other. Like Fight Club.”

I burst out laughing. “Yes, that reminds me of one of our early meetings when we said first rule of Write Club is don’t talk about Write Club.”

The room fills with laughter.

Zeke joins the conversation, “It's truly been an eye-opening experience, this whole thing, and you brought it to us, and I think that's amazing. The way that you conduct yourself, through the whole thing, even when things got weird, was sort of unbelievable. Honestly, if I were you after the second day I would have said, ‘guys, I'm out of here and I'm never coming back.’”

“Thank you, thank you so much,” I say.

Flynn nods and says, “You opened up some stuff from my past. There was some good in my past that I'd forgotten about, and you brought that out. I tend to focus on the tragic things and you brought about some good memories when we did the timeline activity. I got to remember some of the good things that happened in my life. It's not all bad; there are good times I can

focus on too.”

“Nice. You had a reminder of the good. That's awesome, thank you,” I beam.

Marcus clears his throat and starts, “Now Lisa, believe it or not, God is using you. He is using you in a special way, because the way that your heart is, because of your compassion and care and your desire to help, and I truly believe that if you continue this thing, this is just the tip of the iceberg, of what you're trying to do, of what you're trying to build. God is going to open doors in a way that you could never imagine. You're going to touch people and open people's hearts and people are going to be able to see themselves differently and move on in life. He will use you to break their chains of bondage.”

“Thank you, thank you so much Marcus, so sweet,” I say.

Talon laughs and says, “That's real man. You almost made me cry, Marcus.”

Zeke says, “I hope the next group gives themselves the opportunity to learn from you.”

“Thank you for all you brought to the table, and I'm not talking about just snacks. I feel like this went further than even you imagined. Did you think you would get this much out of lab monkeys?” Orion asks.

I can see he has lightened up a bit. I nod and say, “This did go further than I imagined. I got what I needed out of it and I'm ecstatic to see how much you all got out of participating.”

Flynn laughs, “Not bad for a bunch of drug addicts and alcoholics.”

“I think I've said this already. I have been very impressed by what has happened in this room. I don't have words for the creativity, the dedication, the drive you all possess. And you all kept coming back. Thank you,” I say.

Orion leans in and says, “I love the Chicken Soup for the Soul books. I remember reading about a lady who taught elementary school and one day she had each of the students write down

what they liked about all of the other students. She did this every year she taught and one of her students had been in her class for third, fourth, and fifth grade. When he grew up, he enlisted and ended up going to Vietnam and dying in the war. His dad reached out to his old teacher and asked her to come to the funeral because he knew how much she meant to his son. She attended the funeral and when she was there, all his buddies from the military came up to her and told her what an impact she had had on their buddy's life. His dad went up to her after the funeral and pulled a worn paper out of his son's wallet. It was the note from all those years ago with the kids' writing on it. This is going to be one of those classes for me. I feel that a lot of us are going to take what you've given us and remember it for a long time. This has meant a lot to us."

"Thank you, Orion."

I get up and walk over to my cooler. I pull out a surprise.

Flynn jumps out of his seat and runs over to me, "Oh-h-h, look what she got us! Klondike Bars! How did you know what my most favorite thing in the whole world was?"

Talon's eyes light up, "I love Klondike Bars."

Marcus laughs and says, "What would you do for a Klondike Bar?"

Their thank you's are muffled by mouths full of ice cream.

Zeke's voice gets husky, "My mom used to really love these."

Flynn finishes his in three bites. "That was so good." He licks his fingers then jumps up to throw away his garbage. As he heads back to the table he says, "I can't believe this is over. I am sitting here thinking about goodbyes. There's a lot of emotion in goodbye. I grew up in a family where we loved each other but we didn't, my mom and dad didn't say I love you. They didn't kiss. They didn't hold hands. I'm still not real big on hugging.

"I've never been okay moving on because I've never been okay with who I am. I am

much more okay with who I am today, and so, it's bittersweet. I've got to learn how to say goodbye. Let's face it as we get older, people start dying more and more. It's emotional. I don't know. I don't want to say goodbye to you because I hope to see you again.”

I reflect on all he's said. “It is bittersweet like you said. I feel like we've accomplished so much and that our time together has been productive. Now you get to go off and practice what you've learned in here and I get to use what I've learned and do better with my next group.”

Flynn continues, “All my goodbyes have been so painful, no wonder I hate them. Now I'm experiencing a happy goodbye, until we meet again, a happy trails kind of thing. It's new.”

“Yes,” I say. “Exactly. That was part of the point of this exercise. A lot of our goodbyes are usually just horrible, people are ripped from our lives, or we've done damage that feels irreparable at the time and we are forced to walk away. Those are difficult goodbyes.

“We have been on a cool journey together. Even though the journey is over, I think we can still keep part of that journey alive inside of us when we move on. You all will live on in my journey because I will be revisiting these audio recordings and reflection papers for years to come. I will be writing papers and my dissertation based on this experience. You and the work you've done in this room with me will impact others in the future and I think that's a big deal.”

“It's really cool knowing we worked on something bigger than ourselves,” Flynn says. “And you touched on something I really like. This class has been very worthwhile and I don't mean it in a tooting my own horn way but I participated in a project for a doctorate paper. I feel like I've left something behind that somebody might read and connect with in some way and say, ‘that's it, that's why I've been having these problems.’ It's cool to imagine that one day, some kid is going to read our stories and maybe find hope or get help before it's too late.”

I nod and agree, “It will be part of your legacy, right?”



Flynn goes on, “I used this class to explore my past. I could do this class all over again on any issue, like pride, arrogance, issues we all have, and write about it and feel so much better.”

Brice joins the conversation, “I wish we had more classes like this at the ARC.”

Orion says, “Yeah, and you know what's good about this class? We are able to discuss things at length. We're not able to do that at A.A. meetings. A.A. is more about venting and telling the same stories over and over again. Remaining anonymous, when you make a point about something, you do it in an impersonal way. They don't want you to personalize things when you're in those meetings. I think what was great about this class is we are able to personalize it and share how deep it goes. I've seen a side of Flynn that I never knew existed. You're nothing like the person I first met. The stories you told in here are amazing.”

Flynn is laughing. “When I think about the stuff that I shared in here, I wonder, ‘did that really happen to me?’ It's like a movie that I saw somewhere. It couldn't have been the life I lived. It seems so long ago that I got shot and I think, ‘what were you doing getting shot?’ Normal people don't get shot. Normal people don't get stabbed.”

Now I'm laughing. “One of my favorite moments was when you said you never had any near death experiences and then told us you've been shot a couple times and stabbed. You redefined ‘near-death’ for me.”

Flynn shakes it off. “Nah, it wasn't that bad. I kept getting up, didn't I?”

I nod and say, “Okay, gentlemen, who wants to share their goodbye letter they wrote?”

Talon says, “I'm ready. Goodbye is a really hard subject to write about. I recently lost my grandmother to pancreatic cancer. I was told she had a couple months to live and so I left Tampa to head to see her. I ended up drinking impulsively and missed a bus. She ended up dying before I got there. I didn't have a chance to say goodbye. I will carry this guilt for the rest of my life.

However, I know I can't change it and I am determined to stay sober now no matter what.”

“I am sorry, Talon. I cannot imagine the guilt. Thank you. Who’s next?” I ask.

“I’ll go,” Zeke says. “My grandfather was more of a father to me than my own dad. He died suddenly of a heart attack and I never got to say goodbye to him. I wish I would have been in a place in my life where he could have been proud of the person I'd become. I hope it’s not too late to show him what I am made of and how he influenced me. It would have been easier if I knew he was going to pass so I could have told him what he really meant to me and all of the great things I learned from him. I do think he knew what he meant to me but it would have been nice to have had the chance to tell him.”

“Both your stories are of an important, treasured person you didn’t have a chance to let know how you felt or say goodbye. Anyone else have a similar story?” I ask, raising my hand. I look around the room. “Notice that every single one of us has our hand raised.” I point out. “I’ve made a commitment to tell everyone I love how I feel about them all the time. My son laughs at me because sometimes I manage to say it six times in just ten minutes.”

The guys laugh.

Orion gets serious and says, “When it comes to saying goodbye, I don't like to say it because to me it means you will never see that person again. Instead I say ‘talk to you later.’ Or ‘talk to you tomorrow.’ I think it’s less painful if we say it those ways. Some of my relatives I never had a chance to say goodbye to before they passed away. I'm sure instead of goodbye, I would have said something like ‘save me a seat next to you in Heaven or put in a good word for me at the pearly gates.’” He laughs and looks at the others.

Marcus looks around too and says, “Well, the goodbyes I think of are the ones I'll have to say here. Most of these people I don't think I will ever see again and so, I want to say to all of

you, 'thank you for what you brought into my life.' The time we had together helped me become more patient. I learned how to express my feelings and I tried things I've never done before, like coloring. You have been a blessing to me."

I realize Marcus has never mentioned anyone besides his wife and kids. I wonder if he's made any friends during his time in group and at The Salvation Army.

"Thank you," I say. "Flynn or Brice, who wants to go next?"

"I'll go. " Flynn knocks on the table and reads, "I've had to say goodbye to lots of people, my parents, my brother, two close friends, a girlfriend who was murdered, another who OD'd, my divorces were painful goodbyes and saying goodbye to my buddy alcohol has not been easy either. My mom was the only one I had the chance to say goodbye to. I watched her take her last breath. I don't like saying goodbye. It somehow makes me feel guilty. I think being sober, goodbyes will be bittersweet, like in this class. I'm going to miss it, but it is time to move on."

"Thank you, Flynn. Last but not least, Brice."

"Hey buddy, I just want to tell you I love you. We both battled addiction and you lost the war. You helped me more than I ever got a chance to say. We had our differences along the way and I did not get the chance to make amends for my part. Your death cut our friendship short but I want you to know your spirit lives on. I miss you so much. Not being able to say I'm sorry really crushed me. I've always looked up to you and I'm grateful for the time we shared. I want to make right my wrongs to you. I hope you can forgive me and know I love you. You give me inspiration to get this right. Thanks for all you did and I'll see you again one day."

"That was beautiful, Brice. How did it feel to write that letter?" I ask.

"It was weird, but I got to say something I've always wanted to. I hope he heard me."

"He heard you, man," Flynn says. "I really believe that."

“Okay, gentlemen. We’ve just got a few minutes before our time is up. Thank you again. You’ve done great work. I am forever grateful. Let’s do a one word checkout.”

“I’ll go,” Orion says. “I’m satisfied *and* I made this for you.”

“Thank you!” I see he has colored in and created dialogue for the blobs in the tree (see end of the chapter). I chuckle and thank him again. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep it?”

“Nope, I’m done with it.”

“Then, it’s mine. Alright, who’s next?”

Marcus says, “Blessed.”

“Blessed, okay. Thank you, Marcus.”

Before I can say anything, Flynn speaks up, “Content but sad.”

“Happy I stuck it out,” Brice adds.

Talon smiles and says, “Confident. I feel like I’ve got this.”

“Hopeful,” Zeke says.

“Excellent. My word for the night is privileged. I feel privileged you allowed me in and let me get to know you. Thank you for showing vulnerability and heart,” I say. I sit there smiling then remember I wanted their information. “Gentlemen, before you head out, please write your email address and name on this paper if you choose. I’ll send a message in a few days and see if any of you are interested in a follow up meeting.”

“A meeting for what?” asks Flynn.

“I’d like to see what you think about group and what you’ve learned because of our time together. I thought it might be neat to see where you’re at in a few weeks, what you think helped, didn’t help. Things like that.”

“Sign me up,” Flynn bellows. The rest of the men line up to give me email addresses.

“Thank you so much. Have a great night.” I say as the last one wanders out the door.

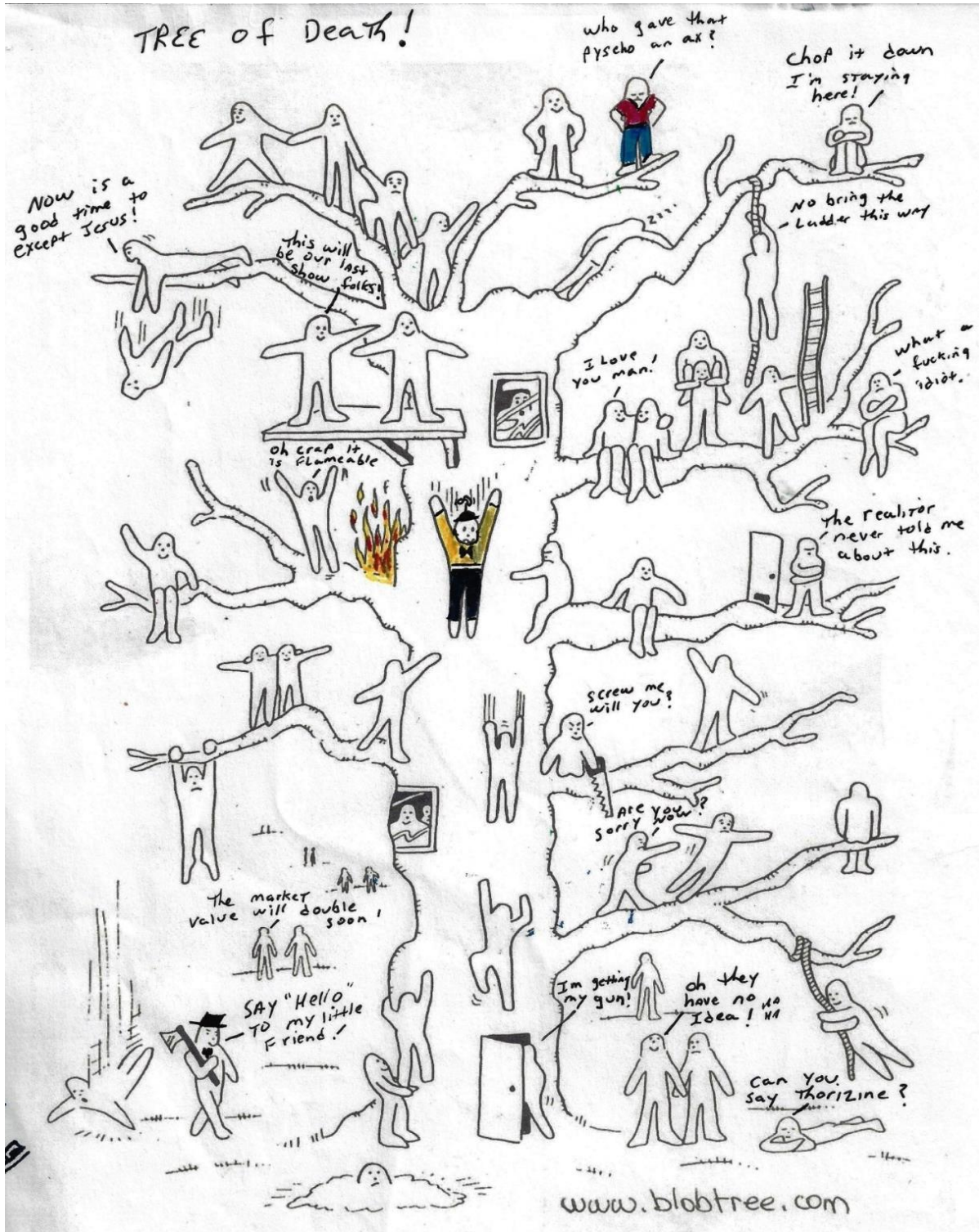


Figure 15. BlobTree Orion gave to me

I pack up for the last time, toss my greasy pizza plate along with the last few sips of soda into the trashcan, and head out the conference room door. Chris, the director, is waiting for me.

“Lisa, please email me the date for when you can start up again.”

“Sure, Chris,” I say. “I’ll check my schedule and let you know.”

“There are several guys already waiting to sign up,” he says. “Your group ended up being one of the impactful groups we offer. The guys who have participated have nothing but good things to say. I’m glad you’re willing to run another round. Thank you for all you are doing.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, Chris. I am enjoying what I do.”

As I drive away, I feel accomplished and satisfied and exhausted and overwhelmed. I think about all the stories they’ve told and how they listened intently to the stories I told. I think back to when Brice said, “It’s cool to know that people without drug and alcohol problems have issues too.” His words ring in my ears. My stories parallel theirs in uncanny ways.

Lines I wrote in a poem when I was thirty reflect my feelings of being out of control and my wild search to feel needed, wanted, and loved:

My high, long gone, along with you,  
Awash in the knowledge, I am the loser, the junkie, the fiend.

I compared what I was feeling to what it might be like to be an addict. The complexity of what makes an addict plays out in my story—early childhood trauma and abuse, irrational behaviors and choices that snatched opportunities from within my grasp, and wakeup call after wakeup call I ignored repeatedly. What made my story different from theirs? How had I found my way out of the cycle of chasing one bad decision with another? Viktor Frankl’s (1984) quote about having a “why to live” making it easier for us find a “how to live” might be one answer. My kids were my impetus to find a new way to exist. What might provide my participants the same motivation, drive, and hope?

When I get home, my apartment is dark. I am surprised as I expected to find my son reclining on the couch binging *Shameless* or playing a video game. I flick on the lights and see his linens are folded and placed neatly on a barstool. The coffee table is clear of debris. The morning flashes through my mind. Besides a few dirty dishes in the sink, all traces of him are gone. Did I say something to offend or alienate? I'm dialing his number as I run room to room checking to see if he's here. Did he say something about leaving that I don't remember?

He answers, "Hey, mama."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Hey, sweetie. What's going on? Looks like you packed up and moved out."

"Yeah, I'm going to sleep in my car for a few days."

"Ummm, okay, is everything okay between us?" I ask.

"Yeah, everything's fine. It just takes too long, forty-five minutes, to get to work from your apartment. I've been late too many times and my boss is on my ass. He said I can park my car on the property if it means I'll be on time."

Inside, I'm screaming, *if you'd get some sleep instead of drinking and staying up all night, you'd be on time*. But instead I say, "Okay, darling. I'm a little worried about you sleeping in your car. It doesn't feel safe."

"I'll be fine. I've gotta go. I'm heading to Soho to party with friends I met last night."

I gulp back tears and say, "Do me a favor. Can you call Uber and not drive?"

"I don't have money for all that."

Everything in me wants to scream, *you don't have money to party either*. But, I don't. I tell him to think about it, to be safe, that I love him dearly, and to call me tomorrow.

He tells me he loves me too and hangs up...

## CONCLUSION

*I arrive to campus and dread what I know will be a twenty minute hunt for a place to park. Miraculously, an empty spot right near the front doors of CIS is waiting. I pull in and gather my things. Upon exiting the car, I hear squeals and laughter float across the parking lot. They echo and seem hollow and out of place. I run toward the source of the sounds, weaving in and out of parked cars, dodging other cars in their reckless pursuit of the elusive open spot.*

*Gradually the asphalt under my feet turns from gravel...to dirt...then weeds. I find myself standing on the edge of a rundown park. The playground equipment is ancient. Three rusty broken swings dangle from a crookedly hung pole. A muddy puddle of leaves and rain lies in wait like a gaping mouth at the bottom of the slide. Boys, ages ranging between four and twelve, are playing together on brightly painted red merry-go-round. Most are hanging on for dear life as others run alongside, twirling and spinning it. When it slows, they trade places, taking turns at propelling themselves into blinding, swirling oblivion. I move closer and watch.*

*They notice me, stop their play, and move toward me. A few stand shoulder to shoulder and older ones guide smaller ones by the hand. A tall, lanky red-head scoops up a toddler and plops him down near a huge picnic basket. Upon exploring the mysterious basket, I find a heaping supply of sandwiches, chips, and canned sodas. The boys collapse around me in the mossy grass draping the ground like a blanket. Ravenous, they scoot closer to me, hands outstretched. It's not until I pass them their food that I can see their faces. Smiling, laughing mouths are masking dark-circled eyes, bruises, welts, scars, scabs, and wounds; innocence and*



*wonder somehow still shining through. They chat and laugh and joke. We eat until we're full and the sun begins to set.*

*The boys head back to the merry-go-round, no longer bright red, no longer on dirt and weeds, instead rusted and worn, on gravel and asphalt. Some climb on while the rest help get the wheel spinning, churning, twirling, rushing to jump on and join in. The boys slowly morph into men, still bruised and battered, no longer laughing and smiling. One by one, they tumble off the merry-go-round now suspended ten feet in the air. They hit the ground, plop, thud, smash. Some limp away while others struggling to stand, brush gravel from fresh wounds and fall back down.*

I blink away hot tears and find myself in bed awakening from a dream, a dream that has left a sinking sense of moral lateness,<sup>3</sup> a desperate feeling of running out of time, of not having done what I could, of missing a chance to intervene. I wish I had taken those boys in, cleaned them up, dressed their wounds, kissed their foreheads, hugged them and let them know they were safe, loved, wanted. But, it's too late...and it was just a dream.

The dream haunts me as I move through my day. Do I really believe it's too late? Are my groups doing any good for those who participate? What have the men gained from the experience? What have I learned? How will I move forward now my project is complete? I sent an email last week asking if past participants would be interested in a follow up meeting. Flynn, Zeke, and Talon responded enthusiastically. Marcus has since graduated, Brice left the facility before graduating, and Orion feels as though a follow up meeting is unnecessary for his continued journey to sobriety. We scheduled our meeting for this evening and some of my questions will be answered soon enough.

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<sup>3</sup> Freeman (2009) says moral lateness is one of the perils of hindsight—looking back and seeing painful truths for which there is no remedy or absolution in the moment of narrative reflection.

I arrive a few minutes early and am greeted by a familiar face behind the glass window.

“Is today your follow-up meeting with the other guys?” Orion asks.

“Yes, it is,” I answer. “You are still welcome to join if you’ve changed your mind.”

“Nah, thanks though. Go on in,” he says.

“Thanks,” I say and look toward the glass door being held ajar by Brad, the white, slight, thirty-something year old, moustached man, I met before group a few weeks earlier. I wonder if the noises in his head are quieting.

“Lisa, do you have a minute?” he asks.

“I do!”

“I wanted to tell you that I spoke to my counselor after we talked. I don’t think I said this before but you’re only the second person I’ve ever told that story to.”

“I didn’t know,” I say.

“I finally told my counselor that story and said the spirit of revenge entered my heart, instead of the spirit of murder.<sup>4</sup> I could feel the difference when I said the words. I felt a little less ugly, a little less evil. It feels like I’ve made room for God to enter my heart and heal me.”

“Oh, Brad. I’m happy you’re finding a way to tell your story in a way that’s kinder to yourself. You were just a little boy when you were subjected to seeing your mom hurt and being hurt yourself. You needed to feel safe and loved, not live in fear...”

He cuts me off. “I just wanted you to know you helped me and say thank you. I’m not sure I’m signing up for your group though. I don’t know if I’ll still be here at the ARC.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for letting me know,” I say and shake his outstretched hand.

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<sup>4</sup> An approach that helps change a person’s interpretation of themselves and their social world is called “story-editing” (Wilson, 2011).

Just as we wrap up, Flynn bounds around the corner and bellows, “Hey, Brad, you signing up for the next round?”

“I’m thinking about it,” Brad says and wanders away.

Flynn and I head toward the conference room and find Talon and Zeke sitting at the far end of the table in “their” seats. I invite them to move in closer since it’s just the four of us today. After doing a quick check-in, I ask and receive permission to turn on the recorder. “Good evening gentlemen. Welcome to our follow up meeting. Thanks for taking time out of your Friday night to meet with me again.”

Flynn raps on the table and says, “Thanks for keeping in touch with us and being interested in what’s happening in our lives.”

“Yeah,” Talon says. “I don’t think I’ve ever been asked to check in after a group has ended. We just move on to our next thing and they all move on to their next groups.”

I feel guilty because while I do care about them and what’s happening in their lives, I have scheduled an “on the record meeting” to bolster and conclude my dissertation work. I relieve some of my guilt by telling them, “I think it will help my project to know how your lives have changed since participating in our Guided Journaling and Storytelling Group. Also, I recognize any changes you experience are not only because of our group, but are a result of all you’ve done and worked on in the past four months while residing here at the ARC.”

“I can tell you something that’s changed just because of you and the group,” Talon says.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I bought two little journals, one for each of my kids, and I’ve been writing something in each of them every morning and night since our group ended. I want my kids to know even though I’m here, far away from them, I am always thinking about them. I know my parents are

taking good care of them but I wish I was the one they could count on. Maybe one day they will be able to count on me...and forgive me.”

“Talon, that’s beautiful. Thank you. How does it feel sitting down to write even though you know your kids will not read them right away?”

“Sometimes, it feels kinda useless, like what’s the point. But, I keep doing it anyway. Later, I figure, even if they don’t ever read it, I’ll have a record of what I was thinking about.”

“That’s true. You can journal for yourself as well. I can only imagine what it might feel like to receive something my dad wrote for me when we were separated. I’d treasure it.”

Talon smiles.

Zeke joins the conversation, “That’s a great idea. I don’t think I’d have the discipline to keep it up though.”

I add, “Isn’t it funny the pressure we put on ourselves. Whatever we are able to write should be enough. If we miss a few days, it’s okay. Journaling should not feel like punishment. When we set out to journal purposefully in an attempt to achieve a specific goal, it will flow more smoothly, and we do it more willingly.”

“Talon, thanks for letting me know how you are using what you learned in group. Now, let’s talk a little about how your lives might have changed since participating...”

Zeke leans in and says, “Mandalas.”

“Mandalas?” I ask.

They all laugh and nod. Zeke continues, “Something about coloring those mandalas helps get my mind quiet and gets me more in tune with myself. People give me crap because I still color. I bought a bunch of adult coloring books after this group, mandalas and intricate designs.”

Talon jumps in, “I have the app on my phone.”

“There’s a mandala phone app?” I ask.

“Yep,” Talon says. “I’ve downloaded it to my phone, and even on that small of a scale, it seems to help. I don’t know if it’s the mandalas or this class or everything all together but life feels like it has slowed down. My mind was going a thousand miles an hour. I couldn’t hear or process what I was supposed to be learning. I couldn’t focus but now I am able to quiet down and reflect, read and understand. Before, I couldn’t even...I can read the bible now and understand what I’m reading.”

Flynn adds, “When I ran out of the mandalas you gave me, I printed more. Did you know there are a bunch of different ones online? Coloring helps me tune out what’s going on in here. I color with my earbuds on and I can concentrate. It’s meditative, I feel myself drifting.”

Mandalas were a late addition to my curriculum. I am thankful they served a greater purpose than mere diversion. I say, “Sounds like a decent coping tool for later when the world might be crushing you, when you experience feeling out of control or are thrown for a loop. It seems mandala coloring can help you forget about what’s going on around you and help you focus on yourself, your feelings, and your breathing.

“Nice. Thanks, guys. In addition to coloring mandalas, what other activities or lessons do you still think about or use from our class?”

Zeke says, “I’d like to say the appreciation or gratitude letter you had us write has been a jumping off point for me to write my amends letter. I didn’t share what I wrote in class that day. I couldn’t. I wasn’t ready. I wanted to write to my best friend who had been murdered. Starting the letter helped me get into my feelings about him, our friendship, his death. He was murdered, it wasn’t his fault, but I was so mad at him; I blamed him for leaving me. As I continued to look at the letter and rewrite it, I realized I was mad at myself. I remembered how he kept reaching

out to me and I was too busy. I'd call him back but not really make time for him. I had been obsessing about drinking. I wanted to use so bad, but I knew if he saw me or hung out with me, he'd know, so I kept him at arm's length. Then he was murdered. That gave me the perfect excuse to full-on relapse. What started out as a thank you note turned into me realizing some ugly truths about myself."

His eyes tear up. He pulls out a tissue, blows his nose, and waves for me to move on.

"Wow, Zeke. Thank you so much for telling us about your writing process," I say. I look at Flynn who is wiping his eyes then back to Zeke. "You just demonstrated what happens once we start writing. As we dig in, we can learn more about ourselves, our situations, and lives. It's amazing how writing about a specific memory unlocks other memories and brings new understandings."<sup>5</sup>

Flynn starts, "When you say writing unlocks other memories, I experienced the same. I used my little note I wrote about regrets as a beginning to an amends letter I wrote to my ex-wife. I said in here that I regretted starting to drink in the morning, which is true, but what I really regret is the snowball effect it had on my life. I was on my last chance with my wife. She really loved me and was so good to me and I was a useless hump. Going to work drunk got me fired which meant my wife had to support us all by herself again. She didn't deserve that, the lies, the insults, my disappearing acts. I don't blame her for leaving. The more I thought about it, wrote on it, including little details like you taught us, the more I could say to her."

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<sup>5</sup> Associative memories arise spontaneously and randomly from streams of consciousness, sensory perceptions, and acts of writing (Neale, 2011).

I interject, “I can see how adding details to the story, to the letter you’re writing, to the memories you’re exploring, can connect you more deeply to the person you’re addressing and can make the apology more meaningful and real.”

Flynn continues, “Yes. I never really had trouble expressing myself, but it feels smoother now, more seamless, like words flow from my head to the paper. I am not just stating facts but I’m adding feelings and thoughts to my writing. I got to read the letter to my ex. She was really kind to me. She even said she played a part in it too. I feel another weight has been lifted from my shoulders and heart. The memories keep coming. I feel myself coming out of the fog and I’m remembering more now. There are new stories to tell.”

“Flynn, that’s wonderful. I’m happy for you,” I say. I’m a bit worried though. A flood of memories could overwhelm these guys if they’re not ready to face what surfaces<sup>6</sup>. I add, “Gently, Flynn. Don’t forget to take care of yourself. Check in with how you’re feeling as you write. Keep in touch with your counselor if the memories or feelings that surface become difficult to process.”

“Um,” Talon says, eyebrows furrowed. “I’ve started to recognize my feelings more, like really feel them, understand them, know what they *feel* like,” he says, rubbing his stomach. “I don’t know if this makes sense, but I could never get into other people’s feelings because I never had or felt my own feelings. I couldn’t worry about where someone else was coming from because I never knew where I was coming from.” He shrugs.

“Are you saying since taking our class you are having an easier time figuring out what you’re feeling which helps you understand how others are feeling too?”

“Yeah, I used to mostly feel angry or numb. That’s it, nothing in between,” Talon says.

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<sup>6</sup> “Mining of memory can open old wounds” (Bochner, 2014, p. 148).

“I don’t know if you realize you’re describing empathy, being able to recognize what others might be feeling.”

Talon laughs. “No, I hope that’s good.”

“Oh, it is. It’s vital to being able to connect and form relationships. Do you feel other feelings now? Feelings that surprise you?”

“Surprise me? Yes, actually. I feel some peace, allowing me to move on. I feel like I’ve done what I’ve set out to do.”

“Accomplished?” I ask.

“Yeah, accomplished, and excited. I don’t ever remember feeling excited about moving on and maybe meeting someone. I wasn’t the man I was supposed to be or doing the things I should be doing. It was hard to have a relationship because I had no feelings. Every girl I ever dated at some point called me cold and heartless. Now, I know what I might want to look for in someone else. I want the kind of connection I feel here talking with you right now. I feel connection. It feels like you see me. I want to be seen, heard, felt. For the first time it feels like I can see, hear, and feel too. It feels like I have a chance at something real.”

I feel my eyes well with tears. “Talon, I hear hope, excitement, and vulnerability in the things you’re saying.”

He smiles and nods, “I wasn’t looking for a girl to share anything with. I’m still not sure I’m ready. Really, I shouldn’t even be thinking about it, but I can’t help it. It gets damn lonely in here. They tell us we have to be careful not to trade one addiction for another. This class has helped a lot but I still have some spiritual and emotional growing to do.”

“That sounds like a healthy thought process and outlook, Talon,” I say. “Thank you.”



## Agency

Flynn leans back in his chair, clears his throat, and asks, “Lisa, what stands out for you from running our class? What did you see or hear that you did not expect?”

“Umm, great question, Flynn.” I am caught off guard and it must show.

Zeke says, “The tables have turned.”

The guys laugh.

I muse, “A few things come to mind immediately. The first is the notion of personal agency and how it applies to you all.”

“Agency?” Talon asks.

“Agency<sup>7</sup> means exercising will, making decisions, being in control, or having power. As I say this, I recognize there’s a paradoxical demand of you all.<sup>8</sup> You are told and must admit to being powerless over alcohol or drugs or gambling. At the same time, you’re counseled and taught it’s within your power to find your way to stop seeking the things you’re addicted to.”

“You think we have power?” Zeke asks.

“I know it feels like you have no power especially since you are heavily monitored and controlled<sup>9</sup>. As addicts in recovery and treatment, you’re subjected to strict rules like the number of clothing items you can have, scheduled times to eat, and no cell phones in facility. There’s not

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<sup>7</sup> Agency is the biologically and socio-culturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001) and is freely exercised within the limits of physical, biological, social and cultural contexts (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> The addiction/personal agency paradox. “Exactly how can people who are, by definition, chronically afflicted by a disease that is beyond their own personal control be empowered to master this disease through participation in a therapeutic community?” (Weinberg, 2000, p. 607).

<sup>9</sup> Those receiving assistance (*beneficiaries* in treatment) are subjected to monitoring and surveillance in an effort to learn if they remain eligible and deserving of the help they receive (Gilliom, 2001) and populations that are considered risky, dangerous, or untrustworthy are often more heavily monitored and controlled (Monahan, 2010).

much wiggle room for you to be individuals. But, you somehow make spaces to claim agency, to exercise a form of power, some control over your journey to recovery.”

“There’s a quote on a handout I gave you during one of our last sessions. It hits the nail on the head regarding the ability to exercise personal agency while subjected to institutionalized restrictions on personal freedoms. ‘Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way’ (Frankl, 1984, p. 86). Even though I came to group with all these goals, plans, and ideas, you recognized from our first interaction it was up to you to choose when or how to engage. You knew you could leave when you wanted, say “no” to being recorded, “pass” if you didn’t feel like participating at any given moment, refuse to do homework, and go at your own pace. I think it’s important to recognize while you are subjected to the rules and norms of The Salvation Army, you find your unique ways to move through the space.”

Flynn smacks the table. “I never thought about it like that. I always felt like I was rebelling and it was wrong to buck the system.”

“I think it matters why you buck the system. If you’re refusing to do something just because you’re told to do it, maybe it’s rebellion. But if you refuse to do something you’re told or look for different ways of doing the thing you’re forced to do because you are doing what fits you or works for you, that can be considered agency. When we recognize there are “always choices to make” (Frankl, 1984, p. 86), we retain a sense of agency and power or control over ourselves. I don’t know. What do you think?”

Flynn is nodding vigorously, “I think you’re right.”

Zeke adds, “It’s interesting to recognize we have some control in here because it usually feels like we have no power.”

Talon says, “Lisa, you made it safe for us to do what we needed to do for ourselves.<sup>10</sup> We felt like we could make those decisions without disappointing you, upsetting you, or letting you down. You never made us feel bad if we couldn’t do the homework or if we didn’t feel like checking in. I don’t know about these guys, but I felt like you welcomed the real me, you encouraged me to show the real me.”

“I agree,” Zeke says. “If I felt forced or *had* to do the homework, I would have done some surface shit. But I knew I could choose to do it which made me want to do it for real. I could decide if I was ready to face the topic you brought to the table instead of writing just anything down.”

“Thank you for putting into words what it felt like to be given the choice to participate. I’d like to point something else out. You exercise agency when you tell your old stories, the ones keeping you trapped in old ways of thinking, old ways of acting, when you retell those old stories in new ways you are taking control of who you are now. Maybe you write yourself out of the role of victim and into the role of survivor or write yourself out of a story where you feel you have no chances left into a story where you know you are worthy of the chances and opportunities that present themselves. This is easier said than done, but I think it’s possible and something to work toward.”

## **Defining Normal**

Flynn, settling comfortably into the role of interviewer, asks, “What other things were you surprised by or learned from being in group with us?”

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<sup>10</sup> Brown (2015) calls this “holding open an empathic space so people can find their own way” (p. 8).

“Let’s see. You all made me think about the notion of what is or can be considered ‘normal.’<sup>11</sup> I think it was you Talon who talked about looking like a normal guy and hanging out with normal people but never again being normal in terms of being able to drink a few beers.<sup>12</sup> For you Flynn, normal means being able to hold down a job and not getting shot or stabbed.”

The table erupts in laughter.

When we settle, I continue, “For you Zeke, normal means being at home with family, fixing up the house, doing family things. It’s like you are measuring yourselves against some set of standards that exists up here (I motion over my head) and unless your life looks exactly like this, you can never be considered normal. But I wonder, what does normal look like for someone who survived a violent childhood, who found his best friend murdered, who struggles with mental health issues, who was fed drugs or alcohol at the age of three?” I pause and let what I’m saying hang in the air.

Zeke clears his throat and asks, “Are you saying that maybe there are different levels of normal?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying really. I’m pointing out there’s this ideal<sup>13</sup> we’re all aiming for but some of us start much farther away from that ideal than others do. It seems ridiculous we are fighting to be seen the same as someone who was raised in a loving home by two happily-married parents, who had all the money needed for good nutrition and afterschool activities, whose lives seem blessed from the beginning. I feel like there’s an undue burden of

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<sup>11</sup> Normal defined by Merriam-Webster.com means conforming to a type, standard, or regular pattern; not deviating from a norm, rule, or principle; occurring naturally; and, of, relating to, or characterized by average intelligence or development or free from mental illness.

<sup>12</sup> Fraser and Valentine (2008) write that normal standards, routinized ways of life, and self-discipline are supposedly absent from the addict and present in everyone else.

<sup>13</sup> Ideal defined by Merriam-Webster.com means existing as an archetypal idea; existing as a mental image or in fancy or imagination only or lacking practicality; of, relating to, or embodying an idea; and, perfect.

shame and humiliation carried by us whose beginnings were far from normal as we repeatedly try but fail to live ‘normal’ lives. Maybe I’m saying we can question the idea of normal, question what we do to feel normal, how we twist and contort ourselves to fit in with what others consider normal<sup>14</sup>. Maybe we’re confusing the word *normal* with the word *ideal*.”

Talon takes a deep, audible breath. “Wow, Lisa. I just realized another reason I drink and use drugs. It’s to help me deal with feeling so far from normal. How messed up is that? I am not normal because I’m addicted, but I drink and use because I don’t feel like I’m normal or fit in.”<sup>15</sup>

“Great insight, Talon. Another paradox facing you all.”

Zeke says, “But if I’m hearing what you’re saying Lisa, it hurts us to measure ourselves against others. If we try to find what’s normal for ourselves, that might be way to go. Maybe get rid of the word normal altogether.”

“Maybe. In *The Four Agreements*, Don Miguel Ruiz (1997) wrote we should strive to always do our best. Our best varies person to person, day to day. My best is different from your best, and my best today is different from my best yesterday. The key word is different, not better. What if we simply strived to do our best, be the best versions of ourselves as is possible instead of worrying about what others expect or think is normal? Although, as I say these words out loud, I know doing what others expect as “normal” can keep you out of trouble.”

Talon asks, “What do you mean?”

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<sup>14</sup> Derrida (2003) asks, “What do we hold against the drug addict” (p. 25), then answers, “That he cuts himself off from the world, in exile from reality, far from objective reality and the real life of the city and the community; that he escapes into a world of simulacrum and fiction” (Derrida, 1993, p. 25).

<sup>15</sup> Jellinek (1952) wrote for the non-addict, life stresses (psychological or social difficulties) cause one to drink and, for the addict, it is the drinking itself that is the problem. Talon experienced the paradox of drinking/drugging to relieve the problems of life and addiction became the problem itself. Another addiction paradox exists for men. Men often drink alcohol as a display of masculinity (power) and paradoxically when men feel gender-role stress (powerlessness), they may turn to using/misusing alcohol as a form of coping (Capraro, 2000).

“Normal might mean a life lived by following the rules, the law, social etiquette, work ethic, things like that. Ideal might mean a life lived under perfect circumstances—white picket fence, enough money to buy all necessities and some luxuries, a marriage without strife, no deaths, no unemployment, and no life-threatening illnesses. I think we blur the line between what can be considered ideal and what is considered normal. If we judge our lives against an ideal version of life, it can be impossible to measure up and we will always feel less-than or deficient. I don’t have an answer really. I think it’s important to not judge ourselves against what we could have been if we only did this one thing when we had the chance to. Here’s where we are today. What’s possible for us today? What choices can we make taking into account who we are right now and what is available to us to create our best lives possible moving forward?”

Flynn shrugs, “Like you said before, it’s easier said than done.”

I agree with him. “Yes, I know. But again, it might be something to strive toward, right?”

They all nod.

Talon says, “Did you learn anything else?”

## **Shame**

I laugh. “Definitely, I learned so much but another thing that immediately comes to mind is the role of shame in all our stories. Remember when we did the masks activity and Zeke pointed out we all seemed to be hiding feelings of insecurity or shame?”

They all nod.

“After listening to the recordings of all our sessions, a pattern became clear. No matter what the prompt, what the activity, our conversations, all our stories had a common thread running through them—feelings of shame. Does that sound right to you?”

“Sure does,” Flynn says.

I continue, “I read shame is the fear of disconnection and is defined as ‘the painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging’ (Brown, 2015, p. 69). Feeling excluded, isolated, and powerless can lead to addiction (Maté, 2010). Thinking back on your stories, I remember hearing that feeling like you didn’t fit in or being lonely and disconnected led to using and eventually misusing drugs and alcohol. Then addiction led to behaviors and situations bringing on more shame and loneliness and more drinking and drugging and so on, like you were stuck in a vicious cycle.

“One way out of the feedback loop of shame and addiction might be to build connections with others which is possible through A.A. meetings, confiding in your sponsor, and participating in groups like ours. Maybe you can think of meetings and groups as opportunities for friendships instead of dreading them as requirements or boring obligations. I don’t know.”

Zeke perks up. “I’m seeing your idea about agency play out here. If I feel forced to go to whatever it is, a group, or a meeting, even a devotional service, it’ll be a drag. I’ll probably be shut down and not open to learning anything new. But if I see it as a choice, see it as a way to meet people I feel I might relate to, or be interested in getting to know, maybe I’ll be more willing to go, more willing to see what might come out of it.”

“Exactly,” I say. I think of Lopate (2013) and know how finding people to connect to, relate with, and just be around helps me feel “a little less lonely and freakish” (p. xxxii).

## **Trust and Connection**

“Okay,” I say. “It’s my turn to ask a question. I am wondering about the trust and connection you all built up while we were in group. Do you still feel it with each other? How is it impacting your lives now group is done? How has it impacted your other relationships?”

Flynn sits up and starts, “I was talking to Marcus the other day. He came by to visit and we were reminiscing about this class. Then Orion walked up and the three of us talked about how we would have never known each other the way we do if it wasn’t for you and this group. The topics you picked helped us open up on a personal level allowing us to share from within and really get to know each other. Did you know Talon and I are accountability partners?”

“Accountability partners?” I ask.

Flynn explains, “Yes. If I try to make excuses for slacking or want to skip a meeting, he’ll step in and hold me accountable, and vice versa.”

“He’s got a lot more work to do than me,” Talon jokes.

The room fills with laughter.

Talon says, “I used to not notice if someone was having a bad day. Now I’m more tuned in. I think it started with the guys in here; we built a pretty big bond and I started to be able to see when they were not their happy-go-lucky selves. Now, I walk by other guys and can actually see when they’re struggling or need to talk. I feel like I have a chance at being a better friend now.”

“Cool, Talon,” I say. “Thanks for that. Zeke it looks like you want to say something.”



“I do,” Zeke says. “My friendships<sup>16</sup> are getting better. I’m a little more open. Being in group with these guys, it was the first time I didn’t hear my stuff being spread around. Now, I throw a little something out there and if doesn’t come back to me, I know I can share more.”

“Hmm, kind of like a test,” I say.

“Yep, exactly. If they pass my test, I know I can trust them.”

“What do you think made it possible for you to start the process of trusting?” I ask.

Zeke purses his lips and strokes his chin. “Hmm. During our group, I noticed there were some guys who weren’t afraid to tell their stories. It was like a push, a signal for me; if this guy trusted me enough to tell his story and give his all, I could try too.<sup>17</sup> And when I saw that none of their stories leaked out and I didn’t hear their stuff being shared outside this room, I felt I could trust everyone inside the room.”

“So, some guys in group set an example for you, opening the door to trusting other people in your life,” I say.

“Yes, exactly.”

“Thanks, Zeke. Next question for you all, what were your most and least favorite activities?” I ask.

## **Impactful Activities**

Flynn roars, “For me, that’s easy. The poem we wrote together. It blew me away. Don’t ever stop doing that activity. What we did together was one of the best experiences I’ve had.”

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<sup>16</sup> Campbell, Holderness, and Riggs (2015) write expressive, open communication and self-disclosure is valued and important in building and maintaining friendships.

<sup>17</sup> Altman and Taylor (1973) call this trust building and reciprocation, the interpersonal cycle of self-disclosure.

I chuckle, “Remember how hard it was to get everyone going. There was some pushback. But once we put it all together, it was amazing.”

“Yeah, and the prayer, hope, and gratitude flags, something so simple was meaningful to me. I was going through a personal loss at the time and I could barely talk about it but doing the quick little sketch helped me process my feelings at the time,” Flynn adds.

Talon says, “For me, the letter to my younger self is something I think about a lot. At first I thought it was stupid to write that letter, so I didn’t put a lot of effort into it. I was wondering what good it would do to look back. It’s not like I can do anything about it. I can’t change it. But, I realized looking back and remembering who I was then and actually recognizing my errors in thinking helps me feel better about looking forward.<sup>18</sup> Wait, that makes no sense.”

“Talk it through, Talon,” I encourage.

“It feels like that since I looked back at who I was then, I understand better who I am now; I can change what I do moving forward.”

“That makes perfect sense. What do you two think?” I ask.

Zeke says, “Everything we did helped me understand myself a little better, helped me express myself better, and made it easier to communicate. There were things I couldn’t do at the time but thought about later. I can’t think of one activity that didn’t serve a purpose.”

“Thank you so much guys. Your feedback is so important.”

“One thing I’d change is I’d make the meetings two hours long,” Flynn says.

“Really?” I ask.

They are all nodding.

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<sup>18</sup> Retelling narratives includes “spontaneous selecting, smoothing, and shaping” in an effort to make sense of and understand the past in light of the present (Freeman, 2009, pg. 154).

“But would you have signed up for a two hour meeting?” I ask. “I remember feeling like you all were worried about signing up for an hour and a half.”

Flynn bellows with laughter. “You’d have to trick us. Start with an hour and a half and build up to two. I really feel like we could have filled two hours.”

“Yeah,” Talon says, “We occupied every bit of time and wished we had longer. We really could have sat in here for two hours. I wished the class never ended. I told guys signing up for the next group there won’t be any space for them because we’re all signing up again.”

They all nod and laugh.

## **Future Directions**

“Any final questions or thoughts?” I ask.

“What are you going to do now? A Ted Talk? A seminar? Teach a class?” Zeke asks.

“Maybe one day, all of the above,” I answer. “For now, I will write my dissertation and continue to do groups here.”

He continues, “Are you going to try and run this type of group with people who have never used drugs and alcohol to cope? I wonder what they’d write about hopelessness, or to their past selves. Maybe you could find where the chemical dependency resides. What stories come out from people who don’t use? Sober people have learned different ways to cope with struggles and hopelessness. It would be nice to know how they do it so you could teach us that too.”

“Great idea, Zeke. I hadn’t thought of running a comparison group,” I say. “How *does* someone who does not drink alcohol or use drugs cope with trauma or catastrophe? I guess a question I have for you is would you listen to people advising you how to cope when they’re unfamiliar with the struggles you experience as an addict?”

Zeke laughs, “Maybe they shouldn’t tell us upfront that they didn’t struggle with addiction; they should let us get to know them first. I think I’m more open to it now since I know people do this type of work because they really care about us and it’s not just because they have experience with addiction.”

“Good point,” I say. “It seems this goes back to being able to trust others’ intentions.”

“Yes,” he says. “That’s feels a little easier to do now.”

“Lisa,” Talon says. “I remember you saying something about working with kids once you write your dissertation. Are you still going to do that?”

“It is one of my goals. I want to tweak our group and take it into adolescent prisons and work with kids who have suffered trauma and loss then turned to drugs and alcohol to cope. Do you think it’s a good idea?”

Flynn says, “I know when I was a kid in prison, I would have enjoyed this class. Who knows what it would have done for me, what troubles I might have avoided by being involved in something like this early on. I have a weird question for you Lisa.”

“Go for it,” I say.

### **Why I Do This Work**

“Why are you working with addicted men?” Flynn asks.

“Good question,” I say. “I’ll tell you some of the answers I’ve come up with so far.

“A man I knew thirty years ago struggled with addiction and mental health issues. I knew very little at the time, not of addiction or bipolar disorder, and not of myself. I loved this man, as a friend, and believed in him and his ability to do anything he set his mind to do. Repeatedly he moved mountains and manifested incredible opportunities for himself out of thin air. He would

work himself into a position of having everything—house, car, job, and money to burn—and just as quickly, throw it all away, leaving wreckage and bewildered, broken hearts in his wake.

“He stole money from me (twice that I know of), borrowed my car twice without asking (yes, I mean stealing), and disappeared for months only to return and beg forgiveness. I still see his face...one moment beaming with hope and promise and the next crying, filled with remorse and guilt, and asking for another chance. Eventually, I cut him off. I had to protect myself.

“About fifteen years ago, I heard he killed himself by driving purposefully into a tree. I cried for days. Was there something I could have done? Was there another way to intervene that could have made a difference? Through running groups with you all, I learned there was nothing I could have done differently. I did everything I could. He needed help I as a friend could not give. What brought me to group facilitation might have been the guilt I felt in turning him away. I wanted to find a way to help others like him. What I ended up getting out of group facilitation with you all is forgiveness for myself.”

Flynn lets out a slow, loud half-breath, half-whistle. “Yep, that’s an all too familiar story, Lisa. I’m sorry to hear about your friend. You really did everything you could. He would have taken you down with him if you didn’t walk away.”

“Thank you, Flynn. Another reason I might be drawn to this work is my own personal experiences with childhood abuse and trauma and drinking alcohol as an escape. I’ve never had a DUI, but it doesn’t mean I didn’t drink more than I should and get behind the wheel. I’ve never lost a job or ruined a relationship because of drinking too much but I feel like I’ve been lucky there too. I’ve had moments where I felt like dissolving into a bottle but somehow I’ve always managed to crawl my way out unscathed. What about my situation helped me keep a job, raise a

family, earn a degree? Was it pure, dumb luck? Is it genetics? Do I have some skill or talent I am unaware of? Or, is there something I can find that is working for me to share with others?"

"Well," Zeke prods. "Did you find the answer?"

"I think it's a combination of factors. For some people, all it took was one bad luck move, a DUI, an accident, being the victim of a crime, the loss of a job, to set in motion a chain of events making it difficult to recover. For some of us, we pressed our luck, over and over, and our luck ran out. Some of us could never catch a break, no matter what we tried, where we turned, nothing panned out. I've turned to alcohol for solace, comfort, to forget, to numb, but I could always stop. I can take it or leave it. That seems like winning the genetic lottery—I do not have the addictive gene. Also, even when I wanted to numb myself or forget about the day, I seem to have too much at stake to melt into total oblivion for more than a few hours at a time. Maybe that's the key—having a why to live makes me fight to find the how to live (Frankl, 1984). What do you all think?"

Talon says, "I definitely pushed it. If I would have thought about what was at risk, really thought about it, I might have been able to stop, to salvage my college career, to have a chance at the pros. But, I guess that's the double edged sword, drinking to forget about pain means you forget about what's good in your life too."

"Good point, Talon," I say. "Anyone else want to add something?"

Zeke begins slowly, "I've seen carnage, destruction, terrors. Having been in the military, then as an EMT and firefighter, I've seen things that would make the strongest man crumble. I can't shake it. I can't unsee it. It haunts me and that's why I use—to forget. I like how you said dissolve. That's what I wanted. I wanted to dissolve into the bottle, the pipe, disappear, forget. I have this beautiful family but my horrific memories bleed all over them, make them invisible,

making me forget all the good I have in my life. Then guilt consumes me. It's ugly inside my head, ugly and scary. I drink and use to make it easier to live with myself."

"Thank you for sharing with us, Zeke," I say. "I don't know how I'd cope with all you've seen and been through. Is it getting any easier since you've been in treatment? Do you feel the horrific memories fading even just a little bit?"

"Just a bit. Enough to let a little hope filter in."

"That was powerful, man," Flynn says. "I hope you find your peace."

"Thanks," Zeke says.

I look up at the clock. "Guys, it's been over an hour. I think it might be time to wrap up. Any final thoughts, ideas, questions, or comments?"

Talon asks, "Will we be able to read your dissertation when it's done?"

"I think it'll be published first as a dissertation, then hopefully as a book. You all have my email address. You are welcome to check in and see what's going on, where I'm at, and if it's out."

"Awesome," Flynn says and jumps up arms stretched out over his head. We all stand and stretch too. They huddle around me, thanking me, hugging me, wishing me luck. I say my goodbyes and head to the car, knowing I'll be back in a few weeks to start a new round.

## **Back at Home**

It's after eight when I get home. Too tired to make dinner, I grab a yogurt and breakfast bar and head to my room. I turn on Netflix and settle in to watch *Law & Order: SVU* reruns. I must have dozed off because I'm startled awake by keys in my front door. I hold my breath. Both my kids have keys, but they usually call before heading over. I look at the clock. It's 2:10 a.m.

I hold my breath and wait...

“Hey, mama,” my son says, his frame filling the void of the bedroom door.

Exhale. “Hey sweetie.”

“Sorry if I scared you. I tried to be quiet,” he says as he crawls onto my bed and wraps his arms around me.

Cigarettes and beer mingle with his breath as he rests his head on my shoulder. I hold him close and kiss his hair. I feel his body relax.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I’m confused. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what’s going on,” he moans.

“What can we do sweetie? Want to talk to somebody?”

“I’m not talking to anyone,” he growls and his body tenses. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Okay, if you change your mind, let me know.” It’s not time to have this talk. I know he’s in no state to hear me but I wanted to open the door to a future conversation. He came to me, needing to feel safe, needing to feel warmth, I will not ruin this moment by making him feel judged or broken.

“I won’t change my mind. Can I just get some sleep? I’m so tired.”

“Of course, rest,” I say, stroking his hair and kissing his head. Knowing he drove to my house after being out and drinking eats me alive. Knowing he made it to my place safely and in one piece does little to soothe me. So far, his luck is holding up. *God, please don’t let his luck run out before he finds his way.*

He knows he’s safe in my arms. It’s like the little boy in him finds his way home to be comforted, nourished, and loved. As I hold him, I think about the guys at The Salvation Army. Do they have arms and homes to go to, a place where they feel comforted, nourished, and loved?



I flash back to my dream and how I woke up feeling like I failed the boys on the playground, of running out of time, of not having done what I could, of missing a chance to intervene. Maybe I doing this work to somehow compensate for all I worry I didn't do for my son when he was little. I have to believe it's not too late—for them, for him, or for me.

### **Afterthoughts**

While working on writing my dissertation paper, I continued to run groups at The Salvation Army. I did this as a volunteer and did not record the sessions, nor did I collect, comment on, or photocopy their responses on the reflection sheets. Staying connected to the site kept me grounded in the work I was doing, but did not allow me to be fully present with the new group. Halfway through the sessions, I found I was forgetting the stories my current participants were telling and sometimes confused their stories with the recorded ones I was listening to and writing about. It was only then I realized the importance of collecting and commenting on participants' written reflections and stories as an integral part of my group success. This "homework" provided an additional layer of connection and care for participants in the group sessions I conducted for research purposes that was lacking in my latest round.

As I continue to write and edit my dissertation, new ideas churn, swirl, and surface. I thought participants would journal more. Maybe they did and kept it to themselves. I feel as though they fulfilled the objectives of group by responding to the weekly prompts in both written and oral form. Processing journals and stories might have been overwhelming and detrimental to the overall efficacy of this project. Should I drop the word "journaling" from the title?

I imagined participants would tell stories of abuses and traumas from childhood, stories that might account for or help explain their susceptibility to misusing alcohol and drugs<sup>19</sup>. While some gave brief accounts of the horrors endured as children, most told tales about traumas arising out struggles with addiction or resulting from being addicted. Maybe older stories take a backseat to or are overshadowed by more recent memories. For some, being alive, the act of living itself was painful and traumatic making it difficult to pinpoint a story or event to write about or discuss with others. “A cruel joke has been played on people who become addicted: They start out thinking they are getting pleasure from the drug and end up running in circles trying to avoid the negative feelings that come from being without it” (Zautra, 2006, p. 156).

I set out with the goal to teach participants how to reframe narratives that might keep them trapped in the cycle of using drugs and alcohol to seek relief from stories of trauma. Instead, I found many of the stories had either never been told before or were told so infrequently that when the men did try to share, their stories seemed fractured and lacked “narrative coherence” (Bochner, 2014, pg. 287). Through our work together, I found several of them have yet to experience a time when they were free from the grip of trauma or when their lives were stable enough for them to look back and attempt to make sense of their lives to this point (Rosenthal, 2003). Even though they live in a safe space, it’s temporary and they know the horrors still lurk and lie in wait on the outside.

Most participants told chaos narratives; embodied stories in which there is no narrative sequence making them difficult to tell, understand, and hear as they are told on the “edges of a wound” and on the “edges of speech” (Frank, 2013, pg. 101). As it’s impossible to reframe a

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<sup>19</sup> Through research on trauma and addiction as well as interviews with people struggling with addiction, Hari (2015) found childhood trauma increases the likelihood of developing various addictions in adulthood.

narrative that's still in process, I instead introduced new frames I hoped were accessible, comprehensible, and possible (Tyrrell, 2014). Asking questions fostered interactions between group members empowering them to see themselves and their situations in new ways. As participants shared stories with me, I became an active listener, giving shape to their stories, making them into stories of my own (Coles, 2014).

I continue to ruminate on the idea of what it means to be normal or to want to be normal. My participants and others who struggle with addiction have often endured difficult beginnings, making it hard to trust and bond with people, and find themselves alone and in pain. Add in Bruce Alexander's thoughts, "today's flood of addiction is occurring because our hyperindividualistic, hypercompetitive, frantic, crisis-ridden society makes most people feel social and culturally isolated" (Hari, 2015, p. 175). Traumatic beginnings and feelings of isolation mark the person who seeks relief from drugs and alcohol as abnormal and different before they become addicted.

Add another layer to feeling abnormal when these folks are diagnosed with mental health issues. Szasz (1960) wrote that mental illness should be viewed as the "expressions of man's struggle with the problem of how he should live" (pg. 117), and what we consider mental illnesses are really communication practices which express ideas that are often unacceptable because they go against the norm.

Interestingly, Alexander (2010) says mass dislocation and collapse of psychosocial integration are built into and "normal" for a free-market society. How will my participants who are saddled with mental health diagnoses, burdened with criminal records, and wear the label of addict ever find their way to feeling "normal" in a culture that ridicules and blames them for their isolation while creating the very circumstances that ensures a section of its population will

be isolated? I'm not going to clean up my discussion on the topic of "normal." The concept of normal is messy to think about, write on, and discuss; imagine what it's like to live outside but long to live within the elusive ideal of what might be considered "normal."

A final thought: ample research exists showing the statistics, probabilities, trends, and themes about addiction, its causes, relapse, and prevention. But, to write about these human things, people must appear on the pages (Billig, 2013). My hope is that through my work and this project, I do more than just tell about addiction but also show what it's like to struggle with addiction; to be haunted by stories of violence and trauma; to feel overwhelmed, abnormal, less-than, disconnected, thrown-away, hopeless; then to see hope spark for those trudging out of the muck and mire. "We avert our eyes from the hard-core drug addict not only to avoid seeing ourselves; we do so to avoid facing our share of responsibility as well" (Maté, 2010, p. 272).

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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix 1: Rules for Guided Journaling and Storytelling Workshop

**Rules** – These are in place to ensure a safe place for us to share creative expressions, private thoughts, painful and difficult emotions, and move toward healing and well-being.

1. **Confidentiality**<sup>20</sup> – what happens in group stays in group. Each of us (including me as group leader) commits to not discussing any of the stories, feelings, experiences, or information shared during group by any of the participating members to any parties outside of group. The only exception to the rule is if any of the participants talks about hurting themselves or others or of being in danger of being hurt by someone else.
2. **Mutual respect** – we all promise to be respectful of each other and ideas, thoughts, stories, experiences shared during group. No side talking and no put downs. Be aware of nervous behaviors, laughing, scoffing, or gasping while others share their thoughts. Questions and requests for clarification are welcome when made courteously.
3. **Participation** – This group has been formed through your voluntary participation. You are not required to share your journaling or thoughts with us but weekly reflection sheets and journaling exercises are provided for you to facilitate progress toward reaching your individual goals and our goals as a group. You may say “pass” at any time.
4. **No giving advice** – We are here to support each other. While we may know of something that has been helpful to us, we cannot say that it will be of value to someone else. We can offer suggestions and input but not advice. No should’s.
5. This is your group; do you have any rules you’d like to suggest we add?

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<sup>20</sup> Yalom (2005) writes that establishing a firm rule about confidentiality is the key to making the room a safe space.

## Appendix 2: Curriculum for Guided Journaling and Storytelling Workshop

### A2(a) Session 1: Introductions, Expectations, and Informed Consent

- A. Informed consent forms and Pre-group surveys
- B. Do any of you have **fear or hesitation** about being a participant in this group?

Common fears and questions include:

- a. Will I be accepted?
  - b. Will I be understood?
  - c. What if I cry?
- C. **Go over the rules** – get verbal acceptance of the rules and signatures from participants.
  - D. **Check In** – name, what you hope to gain from this group, how you are feeling right now?
  - E. Review **reasons** for keeping a journal. (Thompson, 2011)
    - a. Free, always available.
    - b. Tell and retell stories without worry of boring another.
    - c. Provides a map for the work you've done, shows your journey.
    - d. Find your voice, and no judgment.
    - e. Discover yourself. Learn about pieces you did not know were there.
    - f. A tool for organization, developing strategies, working through problems.
    - g. Rehearse and practice when facing difficult events.
    - h. Validates you, your thoughts, and experiences.
  - F. **Reflection Paper (Hope)** – go through and answer questions about work due next week.
  - G. **Reasons to do reflection papers and journal week to week** – this is how we dig deep and process old stories to help write ourselves into new lives and better being. You will not get all you can from this experience if you choose to hold back, limit participation, and do the bare minimum.
  - H. **Check Out** – how you are feeling now, my observations about the group as a whole.



## **A2(b) Session 2: Thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears**

- A.** Revisit **confidentiality** rule.
- B. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- C.** Discuss **how it felt to do reflection paper** over the first week – remind group to reread prior weeks and reflect on those writings with new eyes and new minds.
- D.** Discuss place, time and privacy concerns, if any – ask how others deal with this.
- E. Hand out journals** – provide colorful utensils to decorate, doodle, and take notes.
- F. Define/write personal goals into first pages of journals** – work with each participant to clarify objectives.
- G. Rules about writing** (Thompson, 2011)
  - a. There's no right or wrong way to journal
  - b. You are the expert on your life and the author of your story
  - c. This is an experience not an education
- H.** The following factors **enhance the process** (Thompson, 2011)
  - a. When you are motivated to learn more about yourself.
  - b. When you are committed to seeing what happens.
- I. Benefits** of sharing journal selections aloud – healing that comes from being heard.
- J. Last week's reflection sheet** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflections and journaling to date.
- K. Reflection Sheet (New Beginnings)** – read, go through and answer questions about work due next week.
- L. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, observations about the group as a whole.



### **A2(c) Session 3: Turning Points**

- A.** Revisit **confidentiality** rule, ask if there are questions.
- B. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- C.** Hand out **Mandalas**<sup>21</sup>
- D.** Talk about **journaling process** - rereading prior journal entries and giving yourself feedback as you move through these 12 weeks.
- E. Revisit personal goals** – solidified, reworked, new?
- F. Last week’s reflection sheet** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflection papers and journaling to date.
- G. Group Sharing Activity** – Each participant receives a copy of Robert Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotions to keep.
- H. Group Art Activity** – Hope, Prayer, Gratitude Flags<sup>22</sup>
- I. Reflection Sheet (Turning Points)** – read, go through and answer questions about work due next week.
- J. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- K. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.

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<sup>21</sup> Knowing participants may feel anxious because of the prompts I will use or telling stories never before told, I incorporate an activity known for easing tension and stress. Curry and Kasser (2005) found that coloring Mandalas is meditative and can reduce stress and anxiety by providing structure and direction to chaotic moments.

<sup>22</sup> Malchiodi (2007) says that group art projects can instill hope, encourage social interaction, normalize and show universality of participants’ problems and difficulties, and provide opportunities to support one another.





#### **A2(d) Session 4: Opening up**

- A.** Revisit **confidentiality** rule, ask if there are questions.
- B. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- C.** Talk about **journaling process** - rereading prior journal entries and giving yourself feedback as you move through these 12 weeks.
- D. Revisit personal goals** – solidified, reworked, new?
- E. Last week's reflection sheets** – turn in sheets and open the floor to share the story of one or two turning points.
- F. Hand out TedTalks Sheet** – walk through the top 5 regrets in life, go through resilience, talk about PTG.
- G. Reflection Sheets (Regret)** – read, go through and answer questions about work due next week.
- H. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- I. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.



### **A2(e) Session 5: Scars and Tattoos**

- A. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- B. Last week's reflection sheets** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflections and journaling to date.
- C. Reflection Exercise** – **pick one scar or tattoo and write the story of how you got it.**
- D. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- E. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.



## **A2(f) Session 6: New Beginnings**

- A. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- B. Group Writing Activity** – Collaborative Poem<sup>23</sup>.
- a. Distribute and read Robert Frost’s poem<sup>24</sup>, *The Road Not Taken*, several times aloud.
  - b. Each member uses creative wording and imagery to write a few thoughts that are evoked by the poem.
  - c. Using the lines we came up with individually, we compose a collaborative poem.
- C. Last week’s reflection sheets** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflections and journaling to date.
- D. Talk about favorite songs**...bring in lyrics next week.
- E. Catch up time...no reflection sheets.**
- F. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- G. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.

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<sup>23</sup>Golden (2000) writes that group facilitators can enhance group cohesion through creating a collaborative poem. This is done by sharing preexisting literature, eliciting conversation, encouraging creative written responses, then piecing each individual’s work together to create a group poem.

<sup>24</sup>Collins, Furman, and Langer (2006) reveal that Frost’s poem is often chosen as the piece of preexisting literature used in collaborative poetry writing because it discusses presents the metaphor of a journey and travelers (participants) being faced with making a decisions and important life choices.

## The Road Not Taken, by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by  
And that has made all the difference.

## **A2(g) Session 7: Looking Back**

- A. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- B. Pass out lyrics from favorite songs**
  - a. Play each song and listen.
  - b. Person who picked the song goes first and tells why they like it.
  - c. Then the rest of us have a chance to say how the song impacted us.
- C. Reflection Sheets (Past Selves)** – read, go through and answer questions about work due next week.
- D. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- E. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.

## Reflection Sheet – Past Selves

Read the following lyrics from Brad Paisley's song, Letter to Me:

If I could write a letter to me  
And send it back in time to myself at 17  
First, I'd prove it's me by saying look under your bed  
There's a Skoal can and a "Playboy" no one else would know you hid  
And then I'd say I know it's tough  
When you break up after seven months  
And yeah, I know you really liked her and it just don't seem fair  
But all I can say is pain like that is fast and it's rare

And oh, you got so much going for you, going right  
But I know at 17 it's hard to see past Friday night  
She wasn't right for you and still you feel like there's a knife  
Sticking out of your back and you're wondering if you'll survive  
But you'll make it through this and you'll see  
You're still around to write this letter to me

At the stop sign at Tomlinson and 8th  
Always stop completely, don't just tap your brakes  
And when you get a date with Bridget make sure the tank is full  
On second thought, forget it, that one turns out kind a cool  
Each and every time you have a fight  
Just assume you're wrong and Dad is right  
And you should really thank Ms. Brinkley, she spends so much extra time  
It's like she sees the diamond underneath and she's polishing you 'till you shine

And oh, you got so much going for you, going right  
But I know at 17 it's hard to see past Friday night  
Tonight's the bonfire rally but you're staying home instead  
Because if you fail algebra, Mom and Dad'll kill you dead  
But trust me you'll squeak by and get a C  
And you're still around to write this letter to me

You got so much up ahead, you'll make new friends  
You should see your kids and wife  
And I'd end by saying have no fear  
These are nowhere near the best years of your life  
I guess I'll see you in the mirror when you're a grown man  
P.S., go hug Aunt Rita every chance you can

And oh, you got so much going for you, going right  
But I know at 17 it's hard to see past Friday night  
I wish you'd study Spanish, I wish you'd take a typing class  
I wish you wouldn't worry, let it be  
I'd say have a little faith and you'll see  
If I could write a letter to me, to me





## **A2(h) Session 8: Forgiveness**

- A. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- B. Group Sharing Activity** – Distribute / discuss handout, Common Reactions to Trauma.
  - a. Each member discusses the reactions from the various columns.
  - b. Are these felt only during times of trauma?
  - c. Talk about the times you have felt the different ways.
- C. Last week's reflection sheets** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflections and journaling to date.
- D. Reflection Sheet (Forgiveness)** – read, go through and answer questions about work due next week.
- E. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- F. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.



## **A2(i) Session 9: Looking Ahead**

- A. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- B. Group Activity** – Draw and write yourself as a Superhero<sup>25</sup>
- a. What is your special skill, ability, talent?
  - b. Do you have a sidekick?
  - c. What does your costume look like? Will you wear a cape?
  - d. From within what trauma/tragedy did your powers arise?
  - e. What injustice will you fight?
- C. Last week's reflection sheets** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflections and journaling to date.
- D. Reflection Sheet (Future Selves)** – read, go through and answer questions about work due next week.
- E. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- F. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.

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<sup>25</sup>Rubin (2009) writes that by creating mythological or superhero characters, participants can begin to see themselves as proactive adventurers as opposed to passive victims. In group, they will be instructed to pick a specific skill or ability they already possess or can hone that can resolve a particular conflict or dilemma. This activity will incorporate drawing and writing into one activity encouraging creative exploration of ways to communicate and express oneself.



## **A2(j) Session 10: Resilience & Gratitude**

- A. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- B. Group Activity** – Thank you / gratitude
- a. Think of someone from your past who made a positive difference in your life.
  - b. Take 5 minutes to write them a short thank you note.
  - c. Think of someone you feel grateful for today.
  - d. Are you comfortable telling that person how you feel?
  - e. Come up with 5 things you are currently thankful for.
- C. Last week's reflection sheets** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflections and journaling to date.
- D. Reflection Sheet (Resilience)** – read, go through and answer questions about work due next week.
- E. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- F. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.



### **A2(k) Session 11: Preparing for a Good “Goodbye”**

- A. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- B. Last week’s reflection sheets** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflections and journaling to date.
- C. Reflection Sheet (Goodbyes)** – read, go through and answer questions about work due next week.
- D. Collect journals to copy.**
- E. Breathing exercise** to close group.
- F. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.





## **A2(I) Session 12: Final Session to Wrap up Group**

- A. Check In** – name, how you feel right now, thoughts or unresolved feelings about last session, hopes for this session?
- B. Last week's reflection sheets** – turn in sheets and open the floor for brief sharing about reflections and journaling to date.
- C. Revisit personal goals that were written into the first pages of journals** – open the floor for discussion of how members feel they did - were goals accomplished, reworked, revised?
- D. Group Activity** – Reflect on group activities and processes. Each participant will take turns being the focal point of group. I, along with the other members, will say something positive, uplifting, and encouraging that relates to the work done in group. In effect, we will take turns saying goodbye and ending the relationships formed through the group process.
- E. Making and Keeping Friends** – provide handout from SAMHSA
- F. Reflecting (ongoing)** – continue to journal, grow, heal, explore – who are you, who do you want to be, where do you want to go?
- G. Check Out** – how you are feeling now, what worked or did not work, my observations about the group as a whole.
- H. Breathing exercise** to close group.

## Appendix 3: Forms to Fill Out Before Group Initializes and After Group Ends

### A3(a) Informed Consent

Study ID:Ame1\_Pro00020025 Date Approved: 2/23/2016 Expiration Date: 1/23/2017



#### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study**

**IRB Study # Pro00020025**

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You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

Please tell the study doctor or study staff if you are taking part in another research study.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called: **Guided Journaling Workshop**

The person who is in charge of this research study is **Lisa Spinazola**. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. She is being guided in this research by **Dr. Carolyn Ellis**.

The research will be conducted at **The Salvation Army**.

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#### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to:

- Determine the impact of guided journaling on life satisfaction.
- Using prompts and weekly assignments, we will incorporate various ways of expression (art, storytelling, song, poetry) into the journaling you already do.
- I am a PhD student in Communication at the University of South Florida

#### **Study Procedures**

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Meet for 1.5 hours weekly for 12 weeks and be willing to actively participate.
- Participate through stories and excerpts that you are comfortable sharing with the group, as well as provide feedback to other members of the group.
- Do weekly "homework" assignments which will help inform the following weeks' activities.
- Meeting place will be a classroom at the Salvation Army; you will not have to travel to get to meetings.

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IRB Number: \_\_\_\_\_  
IC Adult Minimal Risk - SB Rev:9-3-2010



IRB Consent Rev. Ver. 2 Date: 02/14/2016  
Page 1 of 5

- You will receive journals and writing/drawing tools for use in and outside of the sessions.
- I will record our sessions, collect homework assignments, and ask permission to photocopy journals upon completion of the study. I will return all your work to you so you have copies of your stories, art, and participation.
- I will be the only one with access to the recordings and your work. My supervisor will have access to the product of my work which will not identify you. Your identifying information (name, age, etc.) will remain private and confidential.
- Once you complete this 12-week group, I will invite you to participate (and have you sign off on a new Informed Consent form) in follow-up interviews and/or focus groups to see what impact, if any, our journaling/storytelling groups have had on your life satisfaction, your understanding of yourself and the way you see the world.

### **Total Number of Participants**

Between 5 and 10 individuals will take part in this specific 12-week group for the study through USF. I will run more groups and may have up to 60 participants over the life of this study.

### **Alternatives**

You do not have to participate in this research study.

### **Benefits**

We are unsure if you will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study.

### **Risks or Discomfort**

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

### **Compensation**

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

The findings from this research may result in the future development of products that are of commercial value. There are no plans to provide you with financial compensation or for you to share in any profits if this should occur.

### **Cost**

There will be no additional costs to you as a result of being in this study.

### **Your Rights:**

You can refuse to sign this form. If you do not sign this form you will not be able to take part in this research study and therefore not be able to receive the research related interventions. However, your health care outside of this study and benefits will not change.

### **How Do I Withdraw Permission to Use My Information?**

You can revoke this form at any time by sending a letter clearly stating that you wish to withdraw your authorization to use of your health information in the research. If you revoke your permission:

- You will no longer be a participant in this research study;
- We will stop collecting new information about you;
- We will use the information collected prior to the revocation of your authorization. This information may already have been used or shared with other, or we may need it to complete and protect the validity of the research; and
- Staff may need to follow-up with you if there is a medical reason to do so.

To revoke this form, please write to:

Principal Investigator  
For IRB Study # Pro00020025  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC35  
Tampa, FL 33612-4799

While we are conducting the research study, we cannot let you see or copy the research information we have about you. After the research is completed, you have a right to see the information about you, as allowed by USF policies.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and study coordinator.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.
- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Florida Department of Health, and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, staff in the USF Office of Research and Innovation, USF Division of Research Integrity and Compliance, and other USF offices who oversee this research.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

### **Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

**New information about the study**

During the course of this study, we may find more information that could be important to you. This includes information that, once learned, might cause you to change your mind about being in the study. We will notify you as soon as possible if such information becomes available.

**You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an adverse event or unanticipated problem, contact Chris Nicely, BA CAP, Program Coordinator for Salvation Army.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638.

### Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true.

**I freely give my consent to take part in this study.** I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

### Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he/she understands:

- What the study is about;
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used;
- What the potential benefits might be; and
- What the known risks might be.

I can confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or analgesic that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and, therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent / Research Authorization

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent / Research Authorization

## A3(b) Life Satisfaction Survey

### Pre-Group and Post-Group Survey

P#:		Date:			
<b>Circle how true each of the following statements are for you at this moment in time</b>					
1. I feel sad and unhappy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
2. I feel alert and awake	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
3. I feel lethargic and low on energy	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
4. I feel alive and vital	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
5. I feel hopeless about the future	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
6. I look forward to each new day	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
7. I feel lonely and isolated	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
8. I have friends and family I can count on	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
9. I have trouble sleeping	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
10. I sleep too much	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
11. I have no appetite	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
12. I eat too much	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
13. I feel unproductive and worthless	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
14. I feel accomplished and competent	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
15. I have trouble focusing on tasks and activities	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
16. I have been able to learn some new skills recently	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
17. I have trouble getting along with friends/coworkers	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
18. People are generally pretty friendly toward me	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
19. I feel tense and nervous	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
20. I am generally relaxed and confident	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
21. I feel angry and irritable	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
22. I am friendly and agreeable	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always



**A3(c) Open Ended Questions in Beginning (fill out during Session One):**

P#: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What do you think about journaling? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Name some benefits you have heard about journaling? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What has journaling done/not done for you? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What do you hope to gain from participating in this workshop? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What are some of your worries or concerns about participating? \_\_\_\_\_

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**A3(d) Open Ended Questions in Closing (fill out during Session Twelve):**

P#: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Now what do you think about journaling? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Name some benefits you have felt from journaling? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. What has journaling done/not done for you? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What have you gained from participating in this workshop? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What suggestions do you have for me moving forward? \_\_\_\_\_

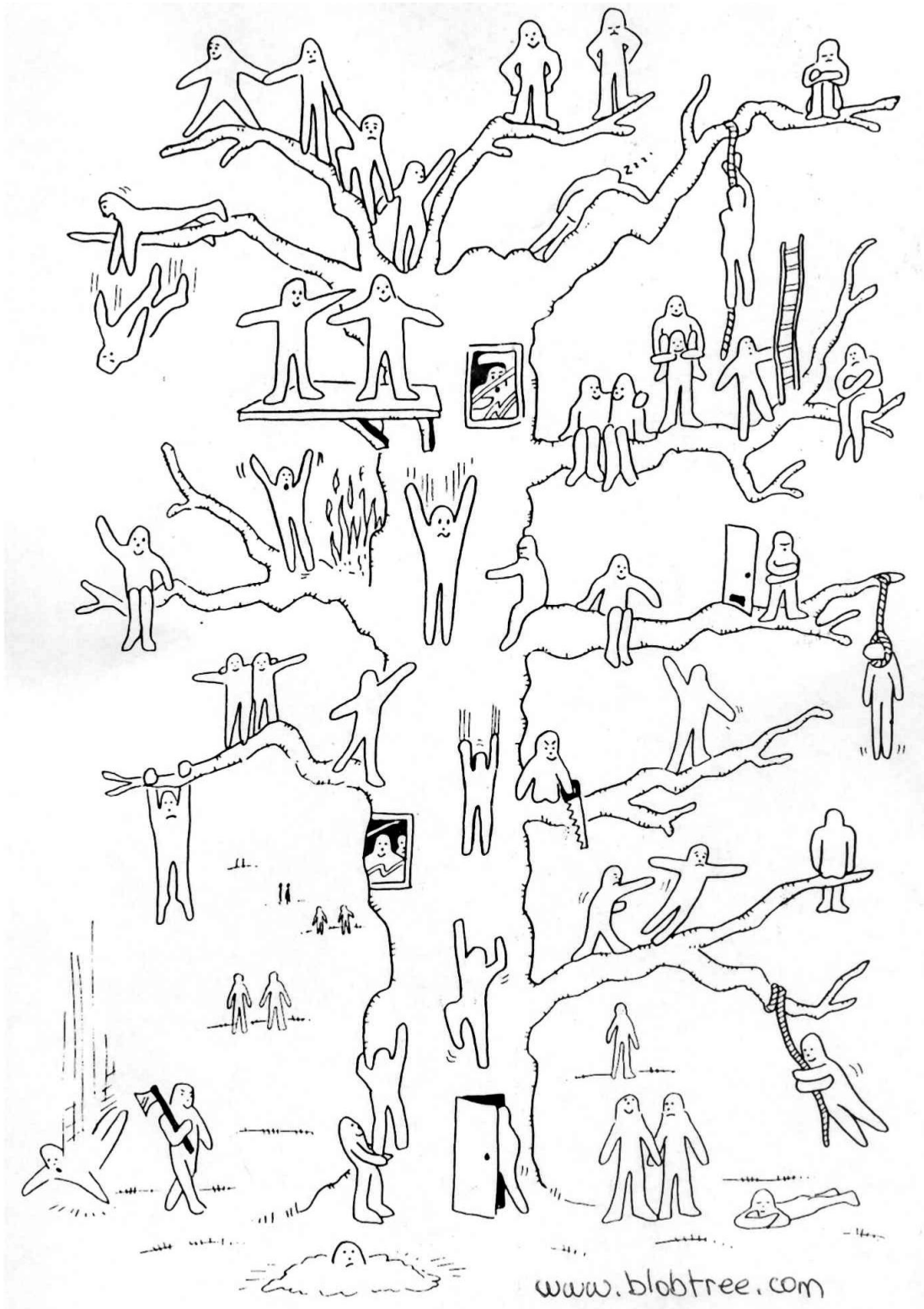
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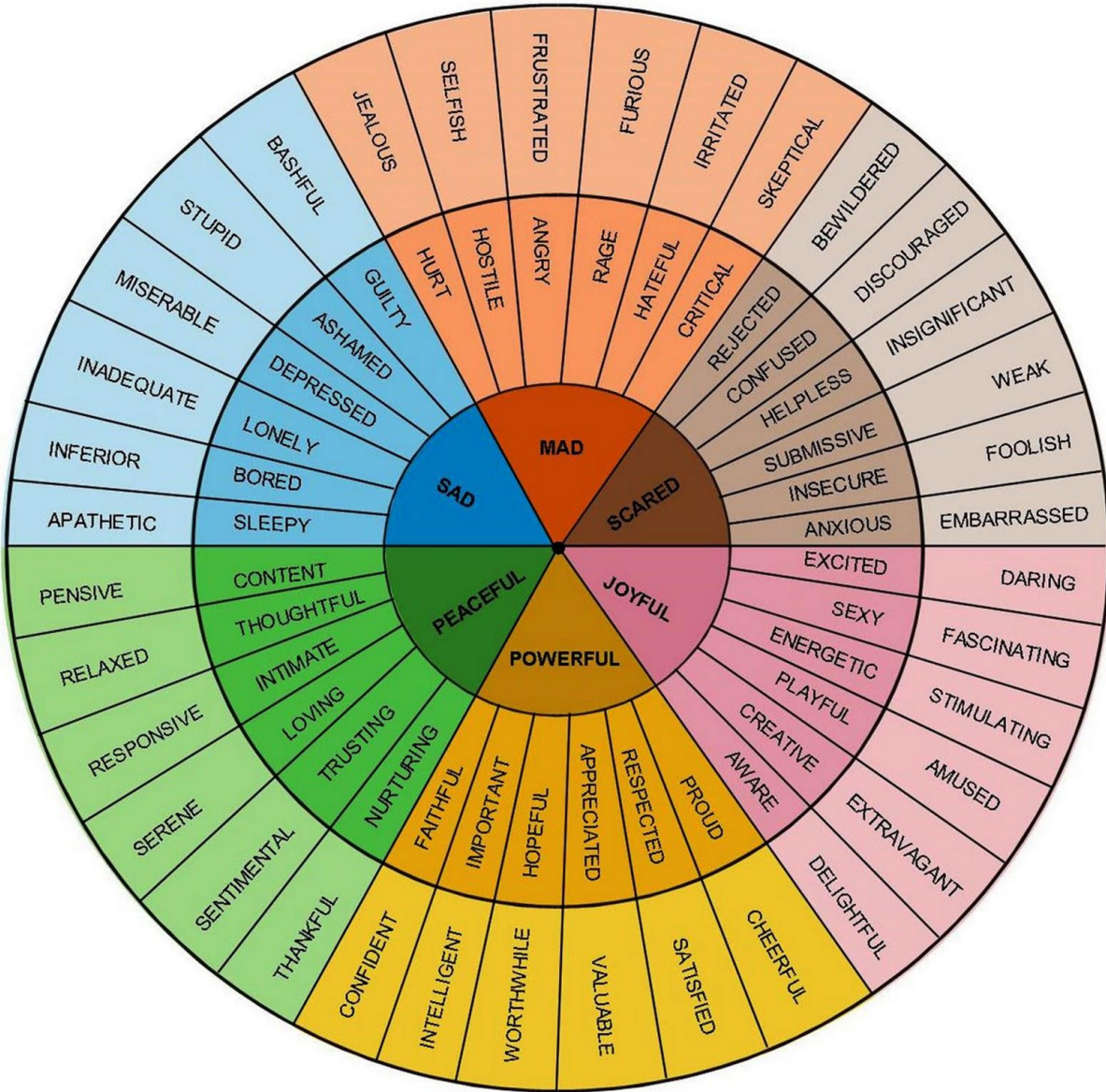
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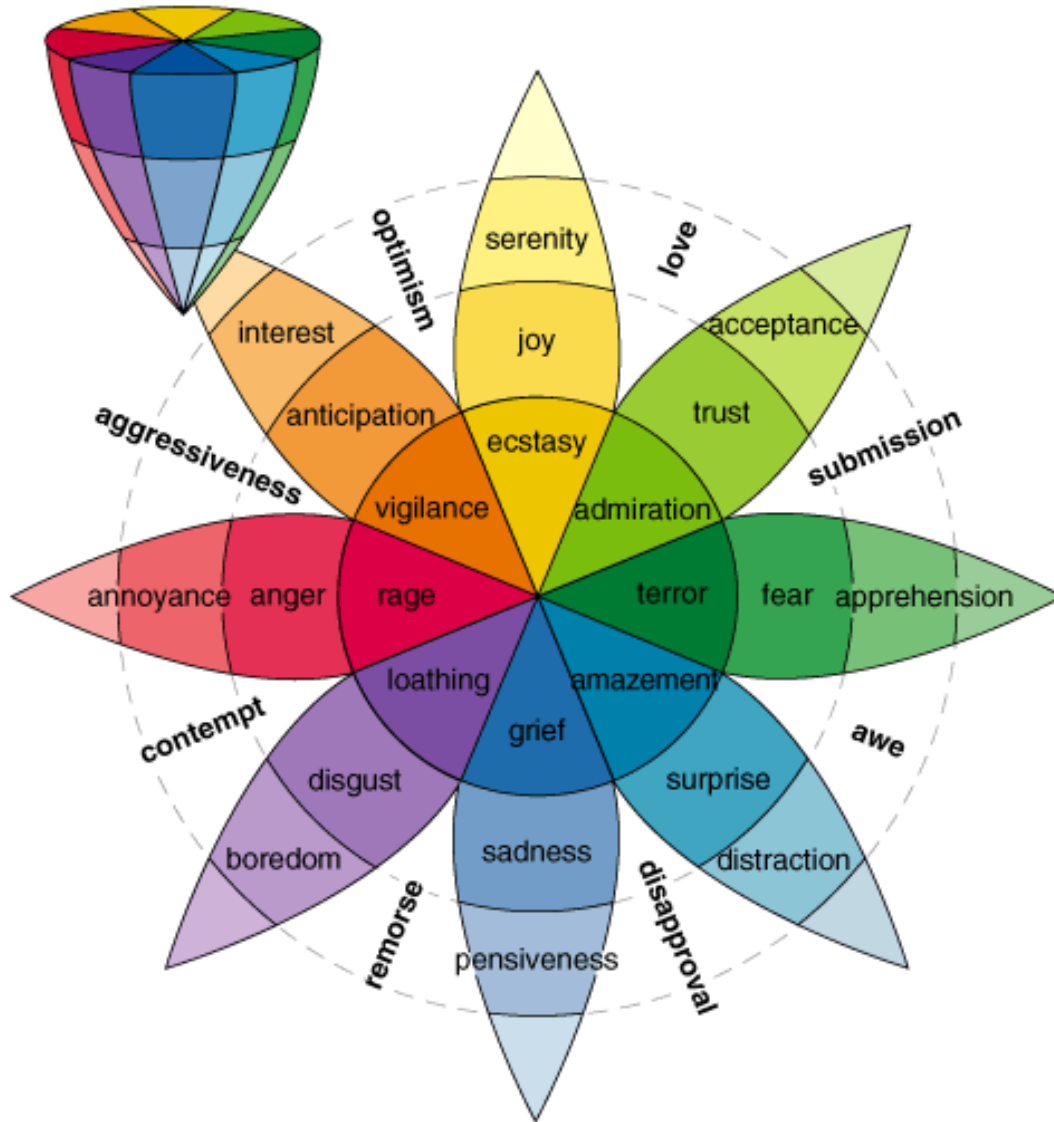
Appendix 4: Exercises, Activities, and Informative Handouts

A4(a) BlobTree



**A4(b) Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions**





**Emotions**

**Resultant Feelings**

**Opposite Feelings**

Anticipation + Joy	=	Optimism	Disapproval
Joy + Trust	=	Love	Remorse
Trust + Fear	=	Submission	Contempt
Fear + Surprise	=	Awe	Aggression
Surprise + Sadness	=	Disappointment	Optimism
Sadness + Disgust	=	Remorse	Love
Disgust + Anger	=	Contempt	Submission
Anger + Anticipation	=	Aggression	Awe

## A4(c) Handouts on Common Reactions to Trauma

### Common Reactions To Trauma

[www.viewsfromatreehouse.com](http://www.viewsfromatreehouse.com)

<b>Physical Reactions</b>	<b>Cognitive Reactions</b>	<b>Emotional Reactions</b>	<b>Behavioral Reactions</b>
Jittery	Changes in the way one thinks about self, other people and the world	Fear, inability to feel safe	Alcohol and/or drug abuse
Muscle tension		Sadness, grief, depression	Exaggerated startle response
Upset stomach	Hyper-vigilance	Anger, irritability	Change in sexual behavior
Fatigue		Numbness, lack of feeling	
Teeth grinding	Intrusive images	Feeling helpless & hopeless	Neglect of health and daily activities
Dizziness	Nightmares		Avoidance of situations
Rapid heart beat	Difficulty making decisions	Loss of joy	Isolation from others
Difficulty sleeping	Being reminded of the trauma by simple events	Guilt	
Easily startled	Self-denigrate	Emptiness	Hysterical reactions
Spacey		Blunted and then extreme emotions	Anger outbursts
Difficulty concentrating	Loss of trust	Despair	Sleep disturbances
Trouble breathing	Loss of self-esteem		
	Denial		

## Common Reactions to Trauma

A traumatic experience produces emotional shock and may cause many emotional problems. This article describes some of the common reactions people have after a trauma. Because everyone responds differently to traumatic events, you may have some of these reactions more than others, and some you may not have at all.

Remember, many changes after a trauma are normal. In fact, most people who directly experience a major trauma have severe problems in the immediate aftermath. Many people then feel much better within three months after the event, but others recover more slowly, and some do not recover enough without help. Becoming more aware of the changes you've undergone since your trauma is the first step toward recovery.

Some of the most common problems after a trauma are described below.

**Fear and anxiety**—Anxiety is a common and natural response to a dangerous situation. For many it lasts long after the trauma ended. This happens when views of the world and a sense of safety have changed. You may become anxious when you remember the trauma. But sometimes anxiety may come from out of the blue. Triggers or cues that can cause anxiety may include places, times of day, certain smells or noises, or any situation that reminds you of the trauma. As you begin to pay more attention to the times you feel afraid you can discover the triggers for your anxiety. In this way, you may learn that some of the out-of-the-blue anxiety is really triggered by things that remind you of your trauma.

**Re-experiencing of the trauma**—People who have been traumatized often re-experience the traumatic event. For example, you may have unwanted thoughts of the trauma, and find yourself unable to get rid of them. Some people have flashbacks, or very vivid images, as if the trauma is occurring again.

**Nightmares** are also common. These symptoms occur because a traumatic experience is so shocking and so different from everyday experiences that you can't fit it into what you know about the world. So in order to understand what happened, your mind keeps bringing the memory back, as if to better digest it and fit it in.

**Increased arousal** is also a common response to trauma. This includes feeling jumpy, jittery, shaky, being easily startled and having trouble concentrating or sleeping. Continuous arousal can lead to impatience and irritability, especially if you're not getting enough sleep. The arousal reactions are due to the fight or flight response in your body. The fight or flight response is the way we protect ourselves against danger, and it occurs also in animals. When we protect ourselves from danger by fighting or running away, we need a lot more energy than usual, so our bodies pump out extra adrenaline to help us get the extra energy we need to survive.

People who have been traumatized often see the world as filled with danger, so their bodies are on constant alert, always ready to respond immediately to any attack. The problem is that increased arousal is useful in truly dangerous situations, such as if you find yourself facing a tiger. But alertness becomes very uncomfortable when it continues for a long time even in safe situations. Another reaction to danger is to freeze, like a deer in the headlights, and this reaction can also occur during a trauma.

**Avoidance** is a common way of managing trauma-related pain. The most common is avoiding situations that remind you of the trauma, such as the place where it happened. Often situations that are less directly related to the trauma are also avoided, such as going out in the evening if the trauma occurred at night. Another way to reduce discomfort is trying to push away painful thoughts and feelings. This can lead to feelings of numbness, where you find it difficult to have both fearful and pleasant or loving feelings. Sometimes the painful thoughts or feelings may be so intense that your mind blocks them out altogether, and you may not remember parts of the trauma.

Many people who have been traumatized feel **angry** and **irritable**. If you are not used to feeling angry this may seem scary as well. It may be especially confusing to feel angry at those who are closest to you.

Sometimes people feel angry because of feeling irritable so often. Anger can also arise from a feeling that the world is not fair.

Trauma often leads to feelings of **guilt** and **shame**. Many people blame themselves for things they did or didn't do to survive. For example, some assault survivors believe that they should have fought off an assailant, and blame themselves for the attack. Others feel that if they had not fought back they wouldn't have gotten hurt. You may feel ashamed because during the trauma you acted in ways that you would not otherwise have done. Sometimes, other people may blame you for the trauma.

Feeling guilty about the trauma means that you are taking responsibility for what occurred. While this may make you feel somewhat more in control, it can also lead to feelings of helplessness and depression.

**Grief and depression** are also common reactions to trauma. This can include feeling down, sad, hopeless or despairing. You may cry more often. You may lose interest in people and activities you used to enjoy. You may also feel that plans you had for the future don't seem to matter anymore, or that life isn't worth living. These feelings can lead to thoughts of wishing you were dead, or doing something to hurt or kill yourself. Because the trauma has changed so much of how you see the world and yourself, it makes sense to feel sad and to grieve for what you lost because of the trauma.

**Self-image** and **views of the world** often become more negative after a trauma. You may tell yourself, "if I hadn't been so weak or stupid this wouldn't have happened to me." Many people see themselves as more negative overall after the trauma ("I am a bad person and deserved this.").

It is also very common to see others more negatively, and to feel that you can't **trust** anyone. If you used to think about the world as a safe place, the trauma may suddenly make you think that the world is very dangerous. If you had previous bad experiences, the trauma convinces you that the world is dangerous and others aren't to be trusted. These negative thoughts often make people feel they have been changed completely by the trauma. Relationships with others can become tense and it is difficult to become intimate with people as your trust decreases.

**Sexual relationships** may also suffer after a traumatic experience. Many people find it difficult to feel sexual or have sexual relationships. This is especially true for those who have been sexually assaulted, since in addition to the lack of trust, sex itself is a reminder of the assault.

Some people increase their **use of alcohol or other substances** after a trauma. If your use of alcohol or drugs changed as a result of your traumatic experience, it can slow down your recovery and cause problems of its own.

Many of the reactions to trauma are connected to one another. For example, a flashback may make you feel out of control, and will therefore produce fear and arousal. Many people think that their common reactions to the trauma mean that they are "going crazy" or "losing it." These thoughts can make them even more fearful. Again, as you become aware of the changes you have gone through since the trauma, and as you process these experiences during treatment, the symptoms should become less distressing.

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Source: National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder



## A4(d) Printout SAMHSA Dealing with the Effects of Trauma

# Dealing with the Effects of Trauma—A Self-Help Guide

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## Foreword

It contains information, ideas, and strategies that people from all over the country have found to be helpful in relieving and preventing troubling feelings and symptoms. The information in this booklet can be used safely along with your other health care treatment.

You may want to read through this booklet at least once before you begin working on developing your own action plans for prevention and recovery. This can help enhance your understanding of the entire process. Then you can go back to work on each section. You may want to do this slowly, working on a portion of it and then putting it aside and coming back to it at another time.

After you have finished developing your plan, you may want to review and revise it on a regular basis as you learn new things about yourself and ways you can help yourself to feel better.

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## Introduction

This is a serious issue. This booklet is just an introduction—a starting point that may give you the courage to take action. It is not meant to be a treatment program. The ideas and strategies are not intended to replace treatment you are currently receiving.

You may have had one or many very upsetting, frightening, or traumatic things happen to you in your life, or that threatened or hurt something you love—even your community. When these kinds of things happen, you may not “get over” them quickly. In fact, you may feel the effects of these traumas for many years, even for the rest of your life. Sometimes you don’t even notice effects right after the trauma happens. Years later you may begin having thoughts, nightmares, and other disturbing symptoms. You may develop these symptoms and not even remember the traumatic thing or things that once happened to you.

For many years, the traumatic things that happened to people were overlooked as a possible cause of frightening, distressing, and sometimes disabling emotional symptoms such as depression, anxiety, phobias, delusions, flashbacks, and being out of touch with reality. In recent years, many researchers and health care providers have become convinced of the connection between trauma and these symptoms. They are developing new treatment programs and revising old ones to better meet the needs of people who have had traumatic experiences.

This booklet can help you to know if traumatic experiences in your life may be causing some or all of the difficult symptoms you are experiencing. It may give you some guidance in working to relieve these symptoms and share with you some simple and safe things you can do to help yourself heal from the effects of trauma.

Some examples of traumatic experiences that may be causing your symptoms include —

- physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- neglect
- war experiences
- outbursts of temper and rage

- alcoholism (your own or in your family)
- physical illnesses, surgeries, and disabilities
- sickness in your family
- loss of close family members and friends
- natural disasters
- accidents

Some things that may be very traumatic to one person hardly seem to bother another person. If something bothers you a lot and it doesn't bother someone else, it doesn't mean there is something wrong with you. People respond to experiences differently.

Do you feel that traumatic things that happened to you may be causing some or all of your distressing and disabling emotional symptoms? Examples of symptoms that may be caused by trauma include —

- anxiety
- insomnia
- agitation
- irritability or rage
- flashbacks or intrusive memories
- feeling disconnected from the world
- unrest in certain situations
- being “shut down”
- being very passive
- feeling depressed
- eating problems
- needing to do certain things over and over
- unusual fears
- impatience
- always having to have things a certain way
- doing strange or risky things
- having a hard time concentrating
- wanting to hurt yourself
- being unable to trust anyone
- feeling unlikable
- feeling unsafe
- using harmful substances
- keeping to yourself
- overworking

Perhaps you have been told that you have a psychiatric or mental illness like depression, bipolar disorder or manic depression, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, obsessive—compulsive disorder, dissociative disorder, an eating disorder, or an anxiety disorder. The ways you can help yourself handle these symptoms and the things your health care providers suggest as treatment may be helpful whether your symptoms are caused by trauma or by a psychiatric illness.

### Help From Health Care Providers, Counselors and Groups

You may decide to reach out to health care providers for assistance in relieving the effects of trauma. This is a good idea. The effects of trauma, even trauma that happened many years ago, can affect your health. You may have an illness that needs treatment. In addition, your health care provider may suggest that you take medications or certain food supplements to relieve your symptoms. Many people find that getting this kind of health care support gives them the relief and energy they need to work on other aspects of healing. To find health care providers in your community who have expertise in addressing issues related to trauma, contact your local mental health agency, hospital, or crisis service.

If you possibly can, work with a counselor or in a special program designed for people who have been traumatized. A counselor or people leading the program may refer you to a group. These groups can be very helpful. However, keep in mind that you need to decide for yourself what you are going to do, and how and when you are going to do it. You must be in charge of your recovery in every way.

Wherever you go for help, the program or treatment should include the following:

**Empowerment**—You must be in charge of your healing in every way to counteract the effects of the trauma where all control was taken away from you.

**Validation**—You need others to listen to you, to validate the importance of what happened to you, to bear witness, and to understand the role of this trauma in your life.

**Connection**—Trauma makes you feel very alone. As part of your healing, you need to reconnect with others. This connection may be part of your treatment.

If you feel the cause of your symptoms is related to trauma in your life, you will want to be careful about your treatment and in making decisions about other areas of your life. The following guidelines will help you decide how to help yourself feel better.

**Have hope.** It is important that you know that you can and will feel better. In the past you may have thought you would never feel better—that the horrible symptoms you experience would go on for the rest of your life. Many people who have experienced the same symptoms that you are experiencing are now feeling much better.

They have gone on to make their lives the way they want them to be and to do the things they want to do.

**Take personal responsibility.** When you have been traumatized, you lose control of your life. You may feel as though you still don't have any control over your life. You begin to take back that control by being in charge of every aspect of your life. Others, including your spouse, family members, friends, and health care professionals will try to tell you what to do. Before you do what they suggest, think about it carefully. Do you feel that it is the best thing for you to do right now? If not, do not do it. You can follow others advice, but be aware that you are choosing to do so. It is important that you make decisions about your own life. You are responsible for your own behavior. Being traumatized is not an acceptable excuse for behavior that hurts you or hurts others.

**Talk to one or more people about what happened to you.** Telling others about the trauma is an important part of healing the effects of trauma. Make sure the person or people you decide to tell are safe people, people who would not hurt you, and who understand that what happened to you is serious. They should know, or you could tell them, that describing what happened to you over and over is an important part of the healing process. Don't tell a person who responds with statements that invalidate your experience, like "That wasn't so bad." "You should just forget about it," "Forgive and forget," or "You think that's bad, let me tell you what happened to me." They don't understand. In connecting with others, avoid spending all your time talking about your traumatic experiences. Spend time listening to others and sharing positive life experiences, like going to movies or watching a ball game together. You will know when you have described your trauma enough, because you won't feel like doing it anymore.

**Develop a close relationship with another person.** You may not feel close to or trust anyone. This may be a result of your traumatic experiences. Part of healing means trusting people again. Think about the person in your life that you like best. Invite them to do something fun with you. If that feels good, make a plan to do something else together at another time—maybe the following week. Keep doing this until you feel close to this person. Then, without giving up on that person, start developing a close relationship with another person. Keep doing this until you have close relationships with at least five people. Support groups and peer support centers are good places to meet people.

## Things You Can Do Every Day to Help Yourself Feel Better

There are many things that happen every day that can cause you to feel ill, uncomfortable, upset, anxious, or irritated. You will want to do things to help yourself feel better as quickly as possible, without doing anything that has negative consequences, for example, drinking, committing crimes, hurting yourself, risking your life, or eating lots of junk food.

- **Read through the following list.** Check off the ideas that appeal to you and give each of them a try when you need to help yourself feel better. Make a list of the ones you find to be most useful, along with those you have successfully used in the past, and hang the list in a prominent place—like on your refrigerator door—as a reminder at times when you need to comfort yourself. Use these techniques whenever you are having a hard time or as a special treat to yourself.
- **Do something fun or creative,** something you really enjoy, like crafts, needlework, painting, drawing, woodworking, making a sculpture, reading fiction, comics, mystery novels, or inspirational writings, doing crossword or jigsaw puzzles, playing a game, taking some photographs, going fishing, going to a movie or other community event, or gardening.
- **Get some exercise.** Exercise is a great way to help yourself feel better while improving your overall stamina and health. The right exercise can even be fun.
- **Write something.** Writing can help you feel better. You can keep lists, record dreams, respond to questions, and explore your feelings. All ways are correct. Don't worry about how well you write. It's not important. It is only for you. Writing about the trauma or traumatic events also helps a lot. It allows you to safely process the emotions you are experiencing. It tells your mind that you are taking care of the situation and helps to relieve the difficult symptoms you may be experiencing. Keep your writings in a safe place where others cannot read them. Share them only with people you feel comfortable with. You may even want to write a letter to the person or people who have treated you badly, telling them how it affected you, and not send the letter.
- **Use your spiritual resources.** Spiritual resources and making use of these resources varies from person to person. For some people it means praying, going to church, or reaching out to a member of the clergy. For others it is meditating or reading affirmations and other kinds of inspirational materials. It may include rituals and ceremonies—whatever feels right to you. Spiritual work does not necessarily occur within the bounds of an organized religion. Remember, you can be spiritual without being religious.
- **Do something routine.** When you don't feel well, it helps to do something “normal”—the kind of thing you do every day or often, things that are part of your routine like taking a shower, washing your hair, making yourself a sandwich, calling a friend or family member, making your bed, walking the dog, or getting gas in the car.
- **Wear something that makes you feel good.** Everybody has certain clothes or jewelry that they enjoy wearing. These are the things to wear when you need to comfort yourself.
- **Get some little things done.** It always helps you feel better if you accomplish something, even if it is a very small thing. Think of some easy things to do that don't take much time. Then do them. Here are some ideas: clean out one drawer, put five pictures in a photo album, dust a book case, read a page in a favorite book, do a load of laundry, cook yourself something healthful, send someone a card.
- **Learn something new.** Think about a topic that you are interested in but have never explored. Find some information on it in the library. Check it out on the Internet. Go to a class. Look at something in a new way. Read a favorite saying, poem, or piece of scripture, and see if you can find new meaning in it.

- **Do a reality check.** Checking in on what is really going on rather than responding to your initial “gut reaction” can be very helpful. For instance, if you come in the house and loud music is playing, it may trigger the thinking that someone is playing the music just to annoy you. The initial reaction is to get really angry with them. That would make both of you feel awful. A reality check gives the person playing the loud music a chance to look at what is really going on. Perhaps the person playing the music thought you wouldn’t be in until later and took advantage of the opportunity to play loud music. If you would call upstairs and ask him to turn down the music so you could rest, he probably would say, “Sure!” It helps if you can stop yourself from jumping to conclusions before you check the facts.
- **Be present in the moment.** This is often referred to as mindfulness. Many of us spend so much time focusing on the future or thinking about the past that we miss out on fully experiencing what is going on in the present. Making a conscious effort to focus your attention on what you are doing right now and what is happening around you can help you feel better. Look around at nature. Feel the weather. Look at the sky when it is filled with stars.
- **Stare at something pretty or something that has special meaning for you.** Stop what you are doing and take a long, close look at a flower, a leaf, a plant, the sky, a work of art, a souvenir from an adventure, a picture of a loved one, or a picture of yourself. Notice how much better you feel after doing this.
- **Play with children in your family or with a pet.** Romping in the grass with a dog, petting a kitten, reading a story to a child, rocking a baby, and similar activities have a calming effect which translates into feeling better.
- **Do a relaxation exercise.** There are many good books available that describe relaxation exercises. Try them to discover which ones you prefer. Practice them daily. Use them whenever you need to help yourself feel better. Relaxation tapes which feature relaxing music or nature sounds are available. Just listening for 10 minutes can help you feel better.
- **Take a warm bath.** This may sound simplistic, but it helps. If you are lucky enough to have access to a Jacuzzi or hot tub, it’s even better. Warm water is relaxing and healing.
- **Expose yourself to something that smells good to you.** Many people have discovered fragrances that help them feel good. Sometimes a bouquet of fragrant flowers or the smell of fresh baked bread will help you feel better.
- **Listen to music.** Pay attention to your sense of hearing by pampering yourself with delightful music you really enjoy. Libraries often have records and tapes available for loan. If you enjoy music, make it an essential part of every day.
- **Make music.** Making music is also a good way to help yourself feel better. Drums and other kinds of musical instruments are popular ways of relieving tension and increasing well-being. Perhaps you have an instrument that you enjoy playing, like a harmonica, kazoo, penny whistle, or guitar.
- **Sing. Singing helps.** It fills your lungs with fresh air and makes you feel better. Sing to yourself. Sing at the top of your lungs. Sing when you are driving your car. Sing when you are in the shower. Sing for the fun of it. Sing along with favorite records, tapes, compact discs, or the radio. Sing the favorite songs you remember from your childhood.

Perhaps you can think of some other things you could do that would help you feel better.

## The Healing Journey

Begin your healing journey by thinking about how it is you would like to feel. Write it down or tell someone else. In order to promote your own healing, you may want to work on one or several of the following issues that you know would help you to feel better.

- Learn to know and appreciate your body. Your body is a miracle. Focus on different parts of your body and how they feel. Think about what that part of your body does for you. Go to your library and review books that teach you about your body and how it works.
- Set boundaries and limits that feel right to you. In all relationships you have the right to define your own limits and boundaries so that you feel comfortable and safe. Say “no” to anything you don’t want. For instance, if someone calls you five times a day, you have the right to ask them to call you less often, or even not to call you at all. If someone comes to your home when you don’t want them to be there, you have the right to ask them to leave. Think about what your boundaries are. They may differ from person to person. You may enjoy it a lot when your sister comes to visit, but you may not want a visit from your brother or a cousin. You may not want anyone to call you on the phone after 10 p.m. Expect and insist that others respect your boundaries.
- Learn to be a good advocate for yourself. Ask for what you want and deserve. Work toward getting what you want and need for yourself. If you want to get more education for yourself so you can do work that you enjoy, find out about available programs, and do what it is you need to do to meet your goal. If you want your physician to help you find the cause of physical problems, insist that he or she do so, or refer you to someone else. When you are making important decisions about your life, like getting or staying married, going back to school, or parenting a child, be sure the decision you make is really in your best interest.
- Build your self-esteem. You are a very special and wonderful person. You deserve all the best things that life has to offer. Remind yourself of this over and over again. Go to the library and review books on building your self-esteem. Do some of the suggested activities.
- Develop a list of activities that help you feel better (refer to the list in the section “**Things you can do to help yourself feel better**”). Do some of these activities every day. Spend more time doing these activities when you are feeling badly.
- Every family develops certain patterns or ways of thinking about and doing things. Those things you learn in your family as a child will often influence you as an adult—sometimes making your life more difficult and getting in the way of meeting your personal goals. Think about the ways of thinking and doing things that guide you in your life. Ask yourself if they are patterns, and if you need to change them to make your life the way you want it to be. For example, in your family you may have been taught that you never tell anyone certain family secrets. In fact, it may be very important to share some family secrets with trusted friends or health care providers. Or you may have been taught that you must always do what certain members of your family want you to do. As an adult, it is important that you figure out for yourself what it is you want to do. In effect you can become your own loving parent.
- Work to establish harmony with your family or the people you live with. Plan fun and interesting activities with them. Listen to them without being critical.
- Work on learning to communicate with others so that they can easily understand what you mean. When talking with another person about your feelings, use “I” statements, like “I feel sad” or “I feel upset” rather than accusing the other person. You may want to practice good communication with a friend. Ask your friend to give you feedback on how you can be more easily understood.

- You may have lots of negative thoughts about yourself and your life. Work on changing these negative thoughts to positive ones. The more you think positive thoughts the better you will feel. For instance, you may always think, “Nobody likes me.” When you think that thought, replace it with a thought like, “I have many friends.” If you often think that you will never feel better, replace that thought with the thought, “Every day I am feeling better and better.”
- Develop an action plan for prevention and recovery. This is a simple plan that helps you stay well and respond to upsetting symptoms and events in ways that will keep you feeling well.

**Using the activities in the section “Things you can do to help yourself feel better,” make lists of things that will help you keep yourself well and will help you to feel better when you are not feeling well. Include lists:**

- to remind yourself of things you need to do every day - like getting a half hour of exercise and eating three healthy meals - and also those things that you may not need to do every day, but if you miss them they will cause stress in your life, for example, buying food, paying bills, or cleaning your home;
- of events or situations that may make you feel worse if they come up, like a fight with a family member, health care provider, or social worker, getting a big bill, or loss of something important to you. Then list things to do (relax, talk to a friend, play your guitar) if these things happen so you won't start feeling badly;
- of early warning signs that indicate you are starting to feel worse - like always feeling tired, sleeping too much, overeating, dropping things, and losing things. Then list things to do (get more rest, take some time off, arrange an appointment with your counselor, cut back on caffeine) to help yourself feel better;
- of signs that things are getting much worse, like you are feeling very depressed, you can't get out of bed in the morning, or you feel negative about everything. Then list things to do that will help you feel better quickly (get someone to stay with you, spend extra time doing things you enjoy, contact your doctor); and
- of information that can be used by others if you become unable to take care of yourself or keep yourself safe, such as signs that indicate you need their help, who you want to help you (give copies of this list to each of these people), the names of your doctor, counselor and pharmacist, all prescriptions and over-the-counter medications, things that others can do that would help you feel better or keep you safe, and things you do not want others to do or that might make you feel worse.

## Barriers to Healing

Are there any things you are doing that are getting in the way of your healing, such as alcohol or drug abuse, being in abusive or unsupportive relationships, self-destructive behaviors such as blaming and shaming yourself, and not taking good care of yourself? Think about the possible negative consequences of these behaviors. For instance, if you get drunk, you might lose control of yourself and the situation and be taken advantage of. If you overeat, the negative consequences might be weight gain, poor body image, and poor health. You may want to work on changing these behaviors by using self-help books, working with a counselor, joining a support group, or attending a 12-step program.

## Moving Forward on Your Healing Journey

If you are now about to begin working on recovering from the effects of trauma, or if you have already begun this work and are planning to continue making some changes based on what you have learned, you will need courage and persistence along the way. You may experience setbacks. From time to time you may get so dis-



couraged that you feel like you want to give up. This happens to everyone. Notice how far you've come. Appreciate even a little progress. Do something nice for yourself and continue your efforts. You deserve an enjoyable life.

Always keep in mind that there are many people, even famous people, who have had traumatic things happen to them. They have worked to relieve the symptoms of this trauma and have gone on to lead happy and rewarding lives. You can too.

## Further Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)  
Center for Mental Health Services  
Web site: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center  
P.O. Box 42557  
Washington, D.C. 20015  
1 (800) 789-2647 (voice)  
Web site: [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)

Consumer Organization and Networking Technical Assistance Center  
(CONTAC)  
P.O. Box 11000  
Charleston, WV 25339  
1 (888) 825-TECH (8324)  
(304) 346-9992 (fax)  
Web site: [www.contac.org](http://www.contac.org)

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)  
(formerly the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association)  
730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501  
Chicago, IL 60610-3526  
(800) 826-3632  
Web site: [www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)  
(Special Support Center)  
Colonial Place Three  
2107 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201-3042  
(703) 524-7600  
Web site: [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

National Empowerment Center  
599 Canal Street, 5 East  
Lawrence, MA 01840  
1-800-power2u  
(800)TDD-POWER (TDD)  
(978)681-6426 (fax)  
Web site: [www.power2u.org](http://www.power2u.org)

National Mental Health Consumers'  
Self-Help Clearinghouse  
1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1207  
Philadelphia, PA 19107  
1 (800) 553-4539 (voice)  
(215) 636-6312 (fax)  
e-mail: [info@mhselfhelp.org](mailto:info@mhselfhelp.org)  
Web site: [www.mhselfhelp.org](http://www.mhselfhelp.org)

National Technical Assistance Center (NATC)  
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors  
66 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 302  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
703-739-9333 (voice)  
703-548-9517 (fax)  
Web site: [www.nasmhpd.org/ntac](http://www.nasmhpd.org/ntac)

Resources listed in this document do not constitute an endorsement by CMHS/SAMHSA/HHS, nor are these resources exhaustive. Nothing is implied by an organization not being referenced.

You could also contact your state consumer advocacy network/agency. Find it by looking under Mental Health in the Yellow Pages of your phone book.

## A4(e) Handout on Post Traumatic Growth and Resilience

From a TedTalk by Jane McGonigal

[https://www.ted.com/talks/jane\\_mcgonigal\\_the\\_game\\_that\\_can\\_give\\_you\\_10\\_extra\\_years\\_of\\_life?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_the_game_that_can_give_you_10_extra_years_of_life?language=en)

Top five regrets vocalized by those dying in hospice.

Number one: I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

Number two: I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

Number three: I wish I had let myself be happier.

Number four: I wish I'd had the courage to express my true self.

Number five: I wish I'd lived a life true to my dreams, instead of what others expected of me.

Here are the top five things that people with post-traumatic growth say: My priorities have changed. I'm not afraid to do what makes me happy. I feel closer to my friends and family. I understand myself better. I know who I really am now. I have a new sense of meaning and purpose in my life. I'm better able to focus on my goals and dreams. Somehow, a traumatic event can unlock our ability to lead a life with fewer regrets.

There are four kinds of strength, or resilience, that contribute to post-traumatic growth, and there are scientifically validated activities that you can do every day to build up these four kinds of resilience, and you don't need a trauma to do it.

**Physical resilience** means that your body can withstand more stress and heal itself faster. The number one thing you can do to boost your physical resilience is to not sit still. That's all it takes. Every single second that you are not sitting still, you are actively improving the health of your heart, and your lungs and brains. What can you do to improve your physical resilience?

**Mental resilience** means you have more mental focus, more discipline, determination and willpower. We know from the scientific research that willpower actually works like a muscle. It gets stronger the more you exercise it. So tackling a tiny challenge without giving up is actually a scientifically validated way to boost your willpower. What is one small challenge you can set for yourself to help build mental resilience?

**Emotional resilience** means you have the ability to provoke powerful, positive emotions like curiosity or love, which we feel when we look at baby animals, when you need them most. What can inspire these feelings in you?

**Social resilience** means you actually gain strength from interacting with your friends, your neighbors, your family, your community. Now, a great way to boost social resilience is gratitude. Touch is even better. Shaking someone's hand for six seconds dramatically raises the level of oxytocin in your bloodstream, now that's the trust hormone. Who can you reach out to and thank? Check on? Check in with? Reach out and shake hands with?

People who regularly boost these four types of resilience — physical, mental, emotional and social — live 10 years longer than everyone else. So this is true. If you are regularly achieving the three-to-one positive emotion ratio, if you are never sitting still for more than an hour at a time, if you are reaching out to one person you care about every single day, if you are tackling tiny goals to boost your willpower, you will live 10 years longer than those who do not.

### *Post-traumatic Growth – Wikipedia entry*

**Post-traumatic growth** or **benefit finding** refers to positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances.<sup>[1]</sup> These sets of circumstances represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources of the individual, and pose significant challenges to individuals' way of understanding the world and their place in it.<sup>[1]</sup> Posttraumatic growth is not about returning to the same life as it was previously experienced before a period of traumatic suffering; but rather it is about undergoing significant 'life-changing' psychological shifts in thinking and relating to the world, that contribute to a personal process of change, that is deeply meaningful.<sup>[1]</sup>

### *History*

The general understanding that suffering and distress can potentially yield positive change is thousands of years old.<sup>[1]</sup> For example, some of the early ideas and writing of the ancient Hebrews, Greeks, and early Christians, as well as some of the teachings of [Hinduism](#), [Buddhism](#), [Islam](#)<sup>[3]</sup> and the [Baha'i Faith](#)<sup>[4]</sup> contain elements of the potentially transformative power of suffering. Attempts to understand and discover the meaning of human suffering represent a central theme of much philosophical inquiry and appear in the works of novelists, dramatists and poets.<sup>[3]</sup> Scholarly interest in post-traumatic growth began to gain considerable strength in the 1990s, based on the idea that greater interest should be placed on studying people who are actually healthy, and the better and brighter aspects of human behavior.<sup>[1]</sup> Today, there is overwhelming evidence that individuals facing a wide variety of very difficult circumstances experience significant changes in their lives many of which they view as highly positive.<sup>[1]</sup> Posttraumatic growth has been documented in relation to various natural and human made traumatic events, including life threatening disease, war, abuse, immigration and death of loved ones.<sup>[5][6]</sup> It has also been documented in many countries and in the context of different cultures with evidence that PTG is a universal phenomenon but also manifests some cultural variations.<sup>[5]</sup> Growth from trauma has been conceptualized not only for individuals but also for families as systems.<sup>[7]</sup>

## ***Causes***

Posttraumatic growth occurs with the attempts to adapt to highly negative sets of circumstances that can engender high levels of psychological distress such as major life crises, which typically engender unpleasant psychological reactions.<sup>[1]</sup> Growth does not occur as a direct result of trauma, rather it is the individual's struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which posttraumatic growth occurs.<sup>[1]</sup> Encouragingly, reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders, since continuing personal distress and growth often coexist.<sup>[1]</sup>

As far as predictors of Post-Traumatic Growth, a number of factors have been associated with adaptive growth following exposure to a trauma. Spirituality has been shown to highly correlate with post-traumatic growth and in fact, many of the most deeply spiritual beliefs are a result of trauma exposure (O'Rourke 2008). Social support has been well documented as a buffer to mental illness and stress response. In regards to Post-Traumatic Growth, not only is high levels of pre-exposure social support associated with growth, but there is some neurobiological evidence to support the idea that support will modulate a pathological response to stress in the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenocortical (HPA) Pathway in the brain (Ozbay 2007). It is also alleged, though currently under further investigation, that opportunity for emotional disclosure can lead to post-traumatic growth though did not significantly reduce post-traumatic stress symptomology (Slavin-Spenny 2010). Gender roles did not reliably predict post-traumatic growth though are indicative of the type of trauma that an individual experiences. Women tend to experience victimization on a more individual and interpersonal level (e.g. sexual victimization) while men tend to experience more systemic and collective traumas (e.g. military and combat). Given that group dynamics appear to play a predictive role in post-traumatic growth, it can be argued that the type of exposure may indirectly predict growth in men (Lilly 2012).

## ***Characteristics***

Results seen in people that have experienced posttraumatic growth include some of the following: greater appreciation of life; changed sense of priorities; warmer, more intimate relationships; greater sense of personal strength; and recognition of new possibilities or paths for one's life and spiritual development.<sup>[8]</sup> Two personality characteristics that may affect the likelihood that people can make positive use of the after-math of traumatic events that befall them include extraversion and openness to experience.<sup>[9]</sup> Also, optimists may be better able to focus attention and resources on the most important matters, and disengage from uncontrollable or unsolvable problems.<sup>[1]</sup> The ability to grieve and gradually accept trauma could also increase

the likelihood of growth.<sup>[1]</sup> It also benefits a person to have supportive others that can aid in post-traumatic growth by providing a way to craft narratives about the changes that have occurred, and by offering perspectives that can be integrated into schema change.<sup>[10]</sup> These relationships help develop narratives; these narratives of trauma and survival are always important in post-traumatic growth because the development of these narratives forces survivors to confront questions of meaning and how answers to those questions can be reconstructed.<sup>[11]</sup> Individual differences in coping strategies set some people on a maladaptive spiral, whereas others proceed on an adaptive spiral.<sup>[12]</sup> With this in mind, some early success in coping could be a precursor to posttraumatic growth.<sup>[12]</sup> A person's level of confidence could also play a role in her or his ability to persist into growth or, out of lack of confidence, give up.<sup>[1]</sup>

A recent article by Iversen, Christiansen & Elklit (2011) suggests that predictors of growth have different effects on PTG on micro-, meso-, and macro level, and a positive predictor of growth on one level can be a negative predictor of growth on another level. This might explain some of the inconsistent research results within the area.<sup>[13]</sup>

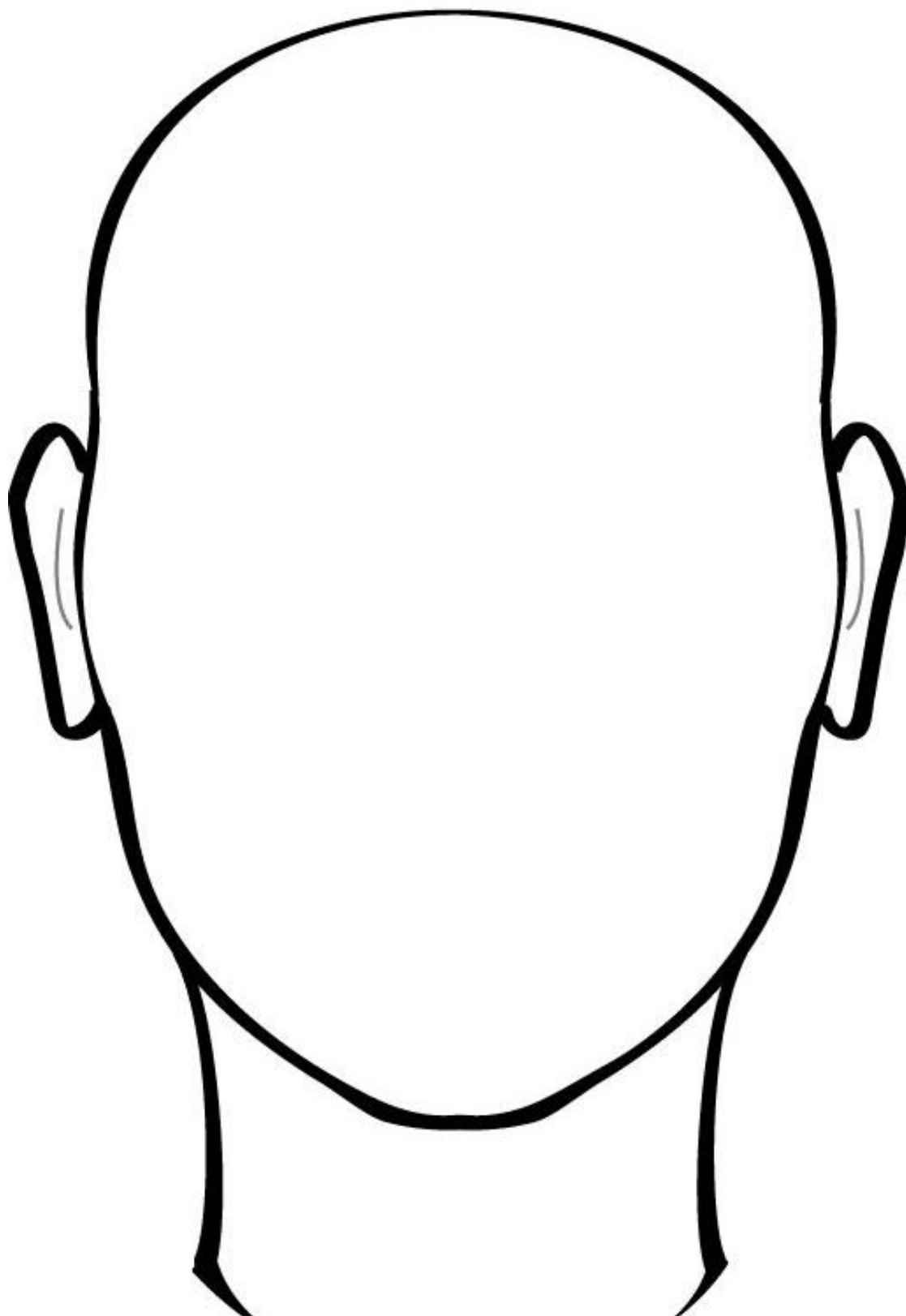
Another characteristic of posttraumatic growth is it can coexist with negative psychological adjustment after traumatic events, so it is important that measures of grief used in both clinical and research domains allow for an assessment of positive response.<sup>[14]</sup>

### ***Related concepts***

In contrast to [resilience](#), [hardiness](#), [optimism](#), and a sense of coherence, post-traumatic growth refers to a change in people that goes beyond an ability to resist and not be damaged by highly stressful circumstances; it involves a movement beyond pre-trauma levels of adaptation.<sup>[1]</sup> It could be possible that people who are highest on these dimensions of coping ability will report relatively little growth.<sup>[1]</sup> That is because these people have coping strategies that will allow them to be less challenged by trauma, and the struggle with trauma may be crucial for post-traumatic growth.<sup>[1]</sup>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posttraumatic\\_growth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posttraumatic_growth)

**A4(f) Masks We Wear Activity, Outline of a Face**



## A4(g) Quotes from Viktor E. Frankl's (2006) *Man's Search for Meaning*

### Quotes from the book, *Man's Search For Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl (survivor of a Nazi Germany Concentration Camp)

***"No-one will be able to make us believe that man is a sublimated animal once we can show that within him there is a repressed angel."***

"Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'."

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to **choose** one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

"The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance."

"But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had **the greatest of courage**, the courage to suffer."

"What is to give light must endure burning."

"Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him. By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true."

"In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice."

"So live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!"

"Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose."

"Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation."

"An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior."

"It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

"Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue."

"Our greatest freedom is the freedom to choose our attitude."

**"I do not forget any good deed done to me & I do not carry a grudge for a bad one."**



“We cannot, after all, judge a biography by its length, by the number of pages in it; we must judge by the richness of the contents...Sometimes the 'unfinisheds' are among the most beautiful symphonies.”

“In the concentration camps, for example, in this living laboratory and on this testing ground, we watched and witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions.”

“Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in its spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance.”

“The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living.”

“It is not freedom from conditions, but it is freedom to take a stand toward the conditions.”

“A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any "how".”

“No man should judge unless he asks himself in absolute honesty whether in a similar situation he might not have done the same.”

“To suffer unnecessarily is masochistic rather than heroic.”

“For the world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless each of us does his best.”

“For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement.”

“The point is not what we expect from life, but rather what life expects from us.”

“Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.”

“Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone.”

“Fear makes come true that which one is afraid of..”

“Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become the next moment. By the same token, every human being has the freedom to change at any instant.”

“Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on.”

“One evening, when we were already resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds and see the wonderful sunset. Standing outside we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colors, from steel blue to blood red. The desolate grey mud huts provided a sharp contrast, while the puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, "How beautiful the world could be..."”

“Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp.”

## A4(h) Making and Keeping Friends

### Making and Keeping Friends—A Self-Help Guide

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## Foreword

This booklet contains information, ideas, and strategies that people from all over the country have found to be helpful in relieving and preventing troubling feelings and symptoms. The information in this booklet can be used safely along with your other health care treatment.

You may want to read through this booklet at least once before you begin working on developing your own action plans for prevention and recovery. This can help enhance your understanding of the entire process. Then you can go back to work on each section. You may want to do this slowly, working on a portion of it and then putting it aside and revise it on a regular basis as you learn new things about yourself and ways you can help yourself to feel better.

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## Introduction

People seem to have a natural need for friends and with good reason. Friends increase your enjoyment of life and relieve feelings of loneliness. They even can help reduce stress and improve your health. Having good friends is especially helpful when you are going through any kind of hard time: experiencing anxiety or panic attacks, depression, phobias or delusional thinking; living with a serious illness or disability; having major surgery; having a loss in your life; or just being under a lot of stress. At times like these, good friends and supporters can make all the difference.

When you are with good friends you feel good about yourself, and you are glad to be with them. A friend is someone who —

- you like, respect, and trust, and who likes, respects and trusts you
- doesn't always understand you, but accepts and likes you as you are, even as you grow and change
- allows you the space to change, grow, make decisions, and even make mistakes
- listens to you and share with you, both the good times and the bad times
- respects your need for confidentiality so you can tell them anything
- lets you freely express your feelings and emotions without judging, teasing, or criticizing
- gives you good advice when you want and ask for it, assists you in taking action that will help you feel better, and works with you in difficult situations to figure out what to do next
- accepts your self-defined limitations and helps you to remove them
- lets you help them when they need it
- you want to be with, but you aren't obsessed about being with
- doesn't ever take advantage of you

A man in a focus group said, "Friendship is a continuing source of bonding, releasing, and creating in yourself and with the other person. There is an emotional bond."

A good friend or supporter may or may not be your age or the same sex as you; come from the same educational, cultural, or religious background; or share interests that are similar to yours. Friendships also have different depths; some are closer to the heart, some more superficial-but they're all useful and good.

**Activity:** List qualities you would like your friends, or some of your friends, to have.

## Making Friends

Making new friends can be exciting or intimidating, depending on your personality and your circumstances, but ultimately it is rewarding. To meet new people who might become your friends, you have to go to places where others are gathered. The hardest thing about going out and doing anything in the community is doing it for the first time. It's hard for everyone. Push through those hard feelings and go. Most of the time, you will be glad you did.

Don't limit yourself to one idea or strategy for meeting people. The broader your effort, the greater your likelihood of success. Try several of these ideas:

- Attend a support group. Support groups are a great way to make new friends. It could be a group for people who have similar health issues or life challenges, or a group for people of the same age or sex.
- Go to community activities like sporting events, theatrical productions, concerts, art shows, poetry readings, book signings, civic groups, special interest groups, and political meetings. Take a course or join a church. Let yourself be seen and known in the community. If money is a problem, consider going to your local library and looking in the newspaper for listings of free events. Spend time in places that are free, like a local bookstore with couches where you can sit and read for a while. You will have a feeling of connection even without any dialogue with others.
- Volunteer. Strong connections often are formed when people work together on projects of mutual concern. When volunteering, you are already with a group of people with a common interest. You could help out at a soup kitchen, read to children in day care, visit people in nursing homes, deliver flowers in the hospital, or serve on a political or social action committee. You could bring snacks for the other volunteers and arrange a time to get together and eat with them for more social contact.

**Activity:** Think about places where you have made friends in the past. Check your newspaper for community events and support groups. Which ones sound appealing to you? Make a commitment to go to at least one of these events or groups.

Note: Some people use chat groups and other connections on the Internet as a way to make friends and to relieve loneliness. While this can be a good short-term way to connect with others, avoid sharing personal information and your phone and address with people you do not know well or whom you have not met in person.

Reaching out to establish a friendship sometimes happens simply and casually. At other times, it takes special effort. If you feel you need and want to take some action so a person you have met becomes a friend, you could —

- ask the person to join you at a cafe for coffee or lunch, to go for a walk, or to engage in some other activity with you
- call the person on the phone to share a piece of good news you think they might be interested in
- send a short, friendly e-mail and see if they respond

- chat with them about something of interest to both of you
- offer to help the person with a particular task if you think it would be appreciated

Even window-shopping with another person can be good, especially if there is a theme, even humorous, like “I’m going to find something in the window I could wear to a Halloween party.” A woman in the focus group said she went window-shopping with a friend. They tried on lots of clothes that they’d buy if they had the money, and it was great fun. Test the waters by proceeding slowly. As you both enjoy each other more, the friendship deepens. Notice how you feel about yourself when you are with the other person. If you feel good about yourself, you may be on the road to a fulfilling friendship.

If you have never had a close friend, you may have a hard time knowing when to take action that will allow the friendship to deepen. A friendship may be starting to get closer if you are feeling more comfortable with that person, you feel content and at ease when the two of you are together, and you feel disappointed when you and the other person can’t get together, but you don’t “fall apart.” You can be aware of how the other person is feeling when they are with you by listening closely to what they are saying, by noticing their body language and responses, and by asking them.

Don’t overwhelm the person with phone calls or other kinds of contact. Use your intuition and common sense to determine when to call and how often. Don’t ever call late at night or early in the morning until you both have agreed to be available to each other in emergencies (for example, one of you is sick or has gotten some very bad news).

**Activity: Think of a time when someone called you too often or disturbed you when you were sleeping. How did it make you feel?**

### Guidelines for Keeping Your Friendships Strong

Like yourself. If you don’t like yourself, don’t feel that you have any value, or don’t think others will like you, you will have a hard time reaching out to people who may become friends. Work on building your self-esteem by treating yourself well—eating healthy foods, getting plenty of exercise and rest, doing things that you enjoy—and by reminding yourself over and over that you are a very special and worthwhile person.

**Activities: Go to the library and get a book to read on building self-esteem. Make a list of at least five things that you do well. Make a sign that says “I am a wonderful person.” Hang it in a place where you will see it often—like on your refrigerator door or on the mirror in your bathroom.**

**Have a variety of interests.** Develop interests in different things—it will open opportunities for connection with others and make you more interesting person that others enjoy being with. Some interests include music, art, crafts, gardening, watching or participating in sports activities, or fixing cars.

**Activity: Make a list of your interests. Hang it on your refrigerator or in another convenient place. It will act as a reminder when you are having a hard time thinking of things to do.**

Enjoy spending time alone. If you don’t enjoy spending time alone, you may feel desperate to have people around you all the time. This desperation can drive others away from you. You can learn to enjoy spending time alone by —

- developing interests and hobbies that you can do by yourself
- anticipating times you will be spending alone and arranging to do some special things for yourself during those times
- changing your attitude about time alone so you enjoy spending a reasonable amount of time alone

- addressing any fears you may have about being alone and doing everything you can to ensure you will be safe, such as locking doors and windows.

Many people have found that pets are a wonderful way to enjoy time alone and to help relieve the loneliness.

**Activity: If you are uncomfortable when you are alone, set aside an hour of time when you can be alone. Make a plan of something enjoyable you can do during that time that focuses on you, like painting a picture, playing a musical instrument, journaling, or taking a walk (not watching television, working, or using the computer). Try to do this at least once a week. As you become comfortable with time alone, set aside longer periods of time alone for yourself.**

**Have plenty of friends.** Work on having several friends so that someone is always available when you would like companionship or support. Expect to have many friends because you are worth it. Relying on only one or two people puts too much pressure on everyone. Some people like to have more friends than others, so the number is really up to your own sense of what you need, but a good goal for most people is to have five close friends.

**Activity: Make a list of your friends with their phone numbers to keep at a convenient place for easy reference. If you don't feel that you have any friends right now, list your health care professionals and family members. Add friends to your list as you make them.**

**Take action to make new friends.** To make new friends, you have to take action. You can do it as slowly or as quickly as you want, taking small steps or big steps. You can also work on improving your relationships with people already in your life by doing things like inviting them to your home to chat, share a meal, play a game, watch a video, or share some other activity, or by doing a favor for them when they are having a hard time.

**Activity: Do something that puts you in contact with others. Go to an event in your community. Join a group.**

**Communicate openly.** To communicate openly with another person, you need to have a feeling of trust with him or her. This develops gradually over time as you come to know the person better and your friendship becomes closer. Tell your friends what you need and want and ask them what they want and need from you. Tell them all important pieces of information, but do not share so much information about minute details that the other person gets bored. Watch the response you are getting from the person or people you are talking to so you can know if this is the right time to be sharing this information or the right subject for the person. You may need to change what you are saying and when you are saying it according to the response you observe. Avoid sharing details of traumatic events that might upset the other person.

Depending on what you are talking about, you may want to talk in a place that is private and where you won't be interrupted, that is congenial and physically comfortable, and that is quiet with few distractions.

**Activity: Think about something special that is going on in your life. Tell a friend or someone you know and like about it. Ask them to tell you about something special that is going on in their life.**

**Listen and share equally.** Listen closely to what the other person is saying. Let the other person know you are paying close attention through eye contact, body language and occasional brief comments like, "I knew you could do it," "That sounds like fun," or "I bet you wish it had happened some other way." Avoid thinking about what your response is going to be while the person is talking. If a person is sharing something intense and personal, give them your full attention. Don't share an "I can top that" story.

Avoid giving others advice unless they ask for it. Just listening is fine! In some cases, you can summarize what you hear them saying or ask clarifying questions, but it is never necessary to "fix the problem" for them. People often need to share the details of hard times or difficult experiences over and over again, until they have "gotten it out of their system" or figured out a way to take some action or solve the problem. You can be a really good friend by listening to the same story again and again, reassuring that it is OK to do this. Never make fun of what the other person thinks or feels. Avoid judging or criticizing the other person.

Sometimes it may be important to be realistic about how much time you can spend listening and let the other person know how much time you have. Be sure that you also have about equal time to share whatever it is you would like to share. Don't be embarrassed by emotions that come up for you or the other person while you are sharing.

**Activity: Practice listening closely to someone who is telling you about a hard time they are having. Give them your full attention. Let them know you care by saying things like "I am sorry you are having such a hard time."**

**Activity: Arrange to spend half an hour with a friend or someone you know, even a family member. Agree to share the time equally—one of you talks for the first fifteen minutes while the other listens—and then you change roles.**

**Take equal responsibility for the friendship.** Both people in a friendship need to take responsibility for the friendship. For instance, you should be making plans for shared activities some of the time and your friend should be making these plans some of the time. If you are taking all of the responsibility for the friendship, talk to your friend about it and figure out a way to make the friendship more equal.

**Activity: Contact someone who has recently invited you to an activity or done something special for you and return the favor. If you can't think of anyone who has invited you anywhere or done something special for you, do something nice for someone who is nice to you—like complimenting a store clerk who is bagging your groceries or thanking your mail delivery person for being so prompt.**

**Keep personal information confidential.** As you feel more and more comfortable with the other person, you will find that you talk more and share more personal information. Have a mutual understanding that anything personal the two of you discuss is absolutely confidential and that you will not share personal information about each other with other people.

**Activity: Write, "I will never share any personal information that another person shares with me." Read it over and over to remind yourself.**

**Have a good time.** Spend most of your time with your friends doing fun, interesting activities, together. Sometimes friendships get "bogged down" if all you ever do is talk about each others struggles. Go to a movie, walk on the beach, play ball, watch a fun video, work on an art project, cook a meal-whatever would be fun for both of you. Take turns suggesting and initiating these activities.

**Activity: Call a friend, or someone you know who you hope will become a friend, and ask them to share a fun activity with you—like going to a movie, watching a video, or making supper together.**

**Stay in touch.** Maintain regular contact with your friends and supporters, even when things are going well. Give them a call, send them a note or an e-mail. Always have a plan for your next meeting—whether it is tomorrow or next month. If you have to change it, do so, but always have a plan. If you can't end a visit by making a plan, make a plan to make a plan, such as "I'll call you Saturday to find a time we can get together." If something you want to share comes up in the meantime, you can arrange a get-together by phone or in person, but always have something planned.

You will find that regular, scheduled contact is the best way to assure that your friendship will remain strong. It means making a commitment to the friendship. Many people find it is helpful to plan ahead for times when they know they may feel lonely, like on the weekend, in the evening, or on holidays. Plan get-togethers for these hard times at least several days in advance and, especially around the holidays, even further ahead. It often is difficult to make last-minute plans for time together with friends.

**Activity: Call a friend or someone you hope will become a friend and arrange to get together at a time when you know it might be hard for you to be alone.**

**Home visits.** Good friends often spend time in each other's homes. By making these times together special, you can enrich your friendships. You can make your friends feel welcome and comfortable in your home by

focusing your full attention on your friends when they are in your home, having a clear, comfortable area for visiting, turning off the television and radio when you are talking or involved in an activity together, and asking other family members to be friendly and welcoming but not too intrusive. Confine pets that may overwhelm or frighten your friends.

**Activity: Call and invite a friend or someone you hope will become a friend for a visit in your home.**

**Losing a friend.** Everyone loses a friend from time to time because of things like moving, changes in life focus, relationship difficulties, or even death. This is difficult for everyone. Spend some time “being with” the sadness that you feel—as much time as you feel you need. Take time to cry, if that feels right to you. Then, spend time with other friends and do things that you enjoy. You even may want to begin making some new friends when you feel ready to do that. The sadness from losing a friend may never go away. You will adjust to it and your life will feel good again.

**Activity: Talk about the loss of this special person with an understanding friend or someone you know well.**

## Establishing and Honoring Boundaries

Feelings inside of you (intuition) let you know who you do and don't want to be close to. Sometimes you may want to be close to a person but are confused by questions of boundaries. You may ask yourself questions like “Have I called too much this week?” “Have I stayed too long; should I leave now?” “Should I offer to help her with the children or would she be uncomfortable with that?” It's appropriate to ask yourself such questions. Boundaries may differ from person to person. You may feel comfortable with some people calling you whenever they feel like it, but you may want to put some restriction around calls from other people. You may not want to go to certain kinds of activities with some friends but be happy to go to the same activity with others.

People commonly set limits or boundaries around things like —

- the amount of time spent together and place to get together
- the kind and frequency of shared activities
- phone call time limits—time of day, frequency, and length
- connection with family
- amount of physical touch
- topics of conversation

In all relationships, you have the right to define your own limits and boundaries so you feel comfortable and safe. Say “no” to anything you don't want. You have the right to ask for what you need, want, and deserve. Expect and insist that others respect your boundaries and, as a good friend, always respect their boundaries.

**Activity: Make a list of boundaries that you have or think you would want to have in friendships.**

## Resolving Problems in Relationships

Because each situation is different, you will have to use your resourcefulness, along with good communication skills and other strategies, to decide what to do and what action to take each time a difficult situation comes up or you become aware of a difference that is keeping your friendship from being a good one. Some things you can do include —

- talk with the other person using “I” statements that describe how you feel in a situation rather than making an assumption about how the other person feels
- work with your friend to develop a plan to resolve the situation, including the steps each of you will take and when you will take them (check in with each other often about your progress)



- do a reality check with yourself, asking yourself what is really happening, and deciding on solutions that will work for you
- be clear with yourself and with your friends about your boundaries, saying “no” when necessary

**Activity:** List any other ideas you might have to solve problems in relationships

## Building Skills That Enhance Friendships

Everyone brings special qualities friendships—qualities that make friendships richer and stronger. The following is a list of some of these qualities —

- being independent and self-sufficient
- being positive, upbeat, and warm
- talking about others in a positive way
- being honest and dependable
- doing your share of both the talking and listening
- being respectful of the other person’s feelings
- keeping yourself clean and well-groomed
- accepting your individual differences
- listening closely without interrupting
- being nonjudgmental
- giving the other person plenty of “space”

**Activity:** Make a list of the strengths you bring to your friendships or to the people in your life, including any from the list above. Give yourself credit for these positive attributes.

**Creating Change.** List the things you would like to work on that you think would make it easier for you to make and keep friends. Acknowledging that you want to improve and reminding yourself of this desire from time to time will create the personal change you are seeking. Ask your family members and friends to support you in these efforts. You may want to ask a health care professional for additional advice and support. Self-help books will give you ideas for creating this change. Of most importance is your determination to change. Remember that everyone has areas that need improvement. Change takes time. Pat yourself on the back for your efforts.

**Activity:** Think of a time when you created some change in your life that made your life better.

**Life circumstances that make friendships difficult.** Factors over which neither you nor the other person have any control can make it difficult to be friends. You may want to be friends or closer friends, but one of these issues may get in the way —

- illness
- distance
- stress
- overwork
- fear
- financial problems or poverty
- differences in expectations
- extreme differences in interests
- lack of transportation

It is important to acknowledge these difficulties, but don’t give up on the friendship if you don’t want to! These factors are challenging, but not impossible! Some factors must simply be accepted—such as distance, and others you can work on changing—such as fear or overwork. For example, a woman in her fifties has been very close friends most of her life with a woman she first met at camp when she was a child. Now they live in

different States and their busy lives keep them from being together as much as they would like. They keep their friendship strong through weekly e-mails.

**Activity: What is a life circumstance that makes it difficult to keep up with one of your friendships or with a person you know well? Using all of your creativity, write five possible ways to resolve this difficulty. If you can't think of enough ideas, ask a friends for suggestions. Then try doing one or more of these things.**

Is this friendship a good idea? Sometimes it is better to avoid getting closely involved with a person or to end a friendship. You may want to stop being friends with a person if they —

- share personal information about others
- do all the talking and not listening
- violate your boundaries
- put others or you down
- tease, ridicule, taunt, “badmouth” friends and family
- lie or are dishonest
- want you to be their friend only or want you to spend all your time with them
- want to always know where you are and who you are with
- don't want to be seen with you in public
- are clingy or very needy
- talk inappropriately about sex or personal matters
- ask questions that make you feel uncomfortable
- ask for risky favors
- engage in illegal behavior
- are physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive

Before you end the friendship, you may want to talk about the troubling behavior. If the person stops doing it, you may be able to continue your friendship. To help you decide if you want to end a friendship, ask yourself the following questions —

Is this person always this way or just this way once in a while?

Is this person having a hard time right now that might be affecting their behavior?

Are you having a hard time right now that may be affecting your feelings and the way you see things?

Do you often enjoy this friendship or do you sometimes feel hurt?

You may be tempted to pursue a relationship with someone even though the person treats you or others badly. However, most people agree it is better not to have a certain friend than to have a person treat you badly. If the things another person says to you or does to you make you feel hurt and the person won't stop doing those kinds of things, he or she is not your friend. It is always your choice whether or not to be friends with another person. Reach out to others for information and advice, but the final decision should always be yours.

**Getting started.** The common-sense information in this booklet comes from people like yourself. It will help you in strengthening those friendships you already have and in making and keeping new friends—friends who will increase your wellness and satisfaction with life. Decide for yourself how best to begin the process of making and keeping friendships.

**Activity: Write down a goal for yourself about making and keeping friends. Write down the steps you will take to reach your goal. Keep this information where you will see it and remember to continue to work on it. When you have reached your goal, give yourself a “ pat on the back” and then set another goal for yourself.**

Set a small daily goal for yourself each day that will help you make new friends or keep your friendships strong like —

- calling one friend or someone you know well
- doing something nice for someone else
- finding out about a support group
- attending a support group
- sending a friend or someone else you know a card or an e-mail.

List some other possible daily goals that you think you could achieve.

Now you are well on the way to expanding your circle of friends.

## Further Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)  
Center for Mental Health Services  
Web site: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center  
P.O. Box 42557  
Washington, D.C. 20015  
1 (800) 789-2647 (voice)  
Web site: [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)

Consumer Organization and Networking Technical Assistance Center  
(CONTAC)  
P.O. Box 11000  
Charleston, WV 25339  
1 (888) 825-TECH (8324)  
(304) 346-9992 (fax)  
Web site: [www.contac.org](http://www.contac.org)

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)  
(formerly the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association)  
730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501  
Chicago, IL 60610-3526  
(800) 826-3632  
Web site: [www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)  
(Special Support Center)  
Colonial Place Three  
2107 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201-3042  
(703) 524-7600  
Web site: [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

National Empowerment Center  
599 Canal Street, 5 East  
Lawrence, MA 01840  
1-800-power2u  
(800)TDD-POWER (TDD)  
(978)681-6426 (fax)  
Web site: [www.power2u.org](http://www.power2u.org)

National Mental Health Consumers'  
Self-Help Clearinghouse  
1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1207  
Philadelphia, PA 19107  
1 (800) 553-4539 (voice)  
(215) 636-6312 (fax)  
e-mail: [info@mhselfhelp.org](mailto:info@mhselfhelp.org)  
Web site: [www.mhselfhelp.org](http://www.mhselfhelp.org)

Resources listed in this document do not constitute an endorsement by CMHS/SAMHSA/HHS, nor are these resources exhaustive. Nothing is implied by an organization not being referenced.

## Appendix 5: Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Steps

Service Material from the General Service Office

### THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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## **Appendix 6: Methods and Methodology**

This project is about human experience, including intimate, emotional, and traumatic experience. The best way I know of representing that experience while being sensitive to my participants is to take a narrative perspective where I showcase their thoughts, words, and emotions in the stories I tell. I also think it important that my participants and others like them, as well as those who work in these organizational settings, are able to read, relate, and learn from my stories. Most people understand and relate to stories and it is how we come to understand others and ourselves (Bochner, 2014). Thus I feature people and their words and actions in this narrative dissertation as I write about human things (Billig, 2013) and write my way to thinking and understanding (Richardson & St Pierre, 2008).

### **Narrative**

Narrative and narrative reframing is discussed in the *Introduction* as it applies to my early life, to the stories my participants told about themselves and their place in the world, and to the reframing of narratives no longer serving to move them and me forward. Before beginning the research, I wanted to add to the literature about what it means to be addicted and what might be a precursor to addiction, as well as look for openings to make a difference in my participants' lives. As I ran group, I told my stories, listened to theirs, gave feedback, highlighted the ways we are connected, and learned about group process. Later, as I transcribed their stories, I found my own stories interlaced with theirs, reframed with their insight, and found myself changed, reconstituted in the telling and listening.

Any research with/on people is the study of “beings existing in narrative and socially constituted by stories” (Bochner & Riggs, year, p. 197). I realized that to contribute to literature in a meaningful way that honors the participants, their stories, and myself as researcher, I needed

to show as well as tell (Lopate, 2013) what it means to struggle with addiction, mental illness, and crumbling social support systems. I wanted to write a story showing the intricacies of group facilitation, participant interaction, compassionate interviewing, collaborative witnessing, and ultimately how learning about others inherently meant learning about myself, my relationships, and how I see the world. Writing inquiry done this way—using personal stories, interpreting, making meaning out of and sense of how lives are lived and memories are made—relates to and calls on an autoethnographic perspective (Bochner, 2013).

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). As I wrote *The Story of Group*, I used personal stories, mine and theirs, to reflect upon the ways our lives intertwined together and intersected with more general cultural phenomena and practices. I also saw how our stories, the old ones we brought to the table and new ones created through our interactions, had the potential to engage audiences in ways that statistics and theories do not (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Along with narrative, autoethnography became vital to my dissertation project as I too was showing up on the pages and in *The Story of Group*.

I told my stories during group to model storytelling and as a way to understand the men’s stories more deeply. In *The Story of Group*, I wrote about how the men’s stories made me think about my own life stories—childhood neglect and abandonment, struggles to fit in and find my place in the world, brushes with death, alcohol use in my family and of my own, and suicidal thoughts. I tied in overarching cultural scripts and concepts that inform and impact how the men and I make sense of where we have been, where we are today, and where we might end up.

Reflexivity in living and in writing requires turning the lens with which we look at the world back upon ourselves (Goodall, 2000). This process helps us make connections between ourselves and the participants of our projects, between our lived experiences and the data we are collecting, and between the *what* we know and the *how* we know it. Reflexivity during group time allowed me to ask thought provoking questions and facilitate interaction between participants. Reflexivity in my writing exposed my biases, fears, judgments, and character.

### **How I Wrote the Story of Group**

How was I going to condense, make sense of, and present over ninety-five hours of recorded data, eighty two participants' stories, and three years' worth of work into a comprehensive, impactful, and evocative document? I decided to use Yalom's (2006) work in *The Schopenhauer Cure* as a guide for taking readers into what it is like to be in group, how it feels to be a facilitator, and what it might be like to wear the label "addict." I started with the curriculum as an outline or backbone for building the story. Based on notes written as I facilitated, I knew there were specific stories that needed to be told, heard, and felt. After determining through a grounded process what those were and where they fit, I listened to the first full round of sessions.

I hit play and a participant's voice broke through the first recording. After almost three years, hearing his voice brought his face into focus. I saw his hands clasping and gesturing in front of him. Eyes closed, I listened. I was suddenly seated on the fifty-yard line of the long conference table with my participants occupying all the available seats. Some faces did not come into focus as clearly as his did. Others were completely obscured "faces and stories lost forever" (Yalom, 2006, p. 12) indicating participants impact me in different ways.



Each one and a half hour session took me between six and eight hours to transcribe. I had to decipher who was speaking and attempt to capture individual comments when two or more participants spoke at the same time. As I transcribed, I took additional notes while listening to the recorded data. I transcribed methodically and in great detail each of the eleven meetings I had with my inaugural group of participants. (I did not record the very first meeting of any of the rounds as participants had not yet signed off on informed consent documents.)

For the purposes of the final product, I knew I'd have to reduce the normal twelve sessions. Seven fully-detailed sessions would be enough to give readers the experience of experiencing what it felt like being in group. While transcribing, I made strategic decisions. I determined which prompts and topics I'd include in *The Story of Group*; thought through how to best showcase the group process and demonstrate the building and developing trust; and chose specific dialogue to show compassionate interviewing and collaborative witnessing in action.

Which characters would figure prominently, who moved the story along, and who could be left out (Carr, 1986)? Based on the first full round and using constructivist grounded theory, I coded participant stories and responses as I outlined the composite characters to include (Janesick, 2000). Each beneficiary had horror stories haunting them but the way they participated and interacted separated them into specific character types that made repeated appearances. There always seemed to be one who talked and talked, but rarely told any personal stories; another who gave heart and soul, digging deep into their hurt and pain; and one who felt coerced by his counselor into joining.

I encountered someone in each round who stepped into the role of parental figure or co-facilitator; another who was childlike and engendered compassion from most; and the strong, silent type, who when he spoke held the room captive. Each round had one or two men who left

everything in the hands of the Lord and a couple who barely mentioned God. The pseudonyms for my characters were chosen randomly from various internet lists of men's names. I picked names that were not actual names of any of my eighty-two participants.

I read through the men's written stories based on weekly prompts from all eight rounds to determine which stories fit the composite characters I was developing. Once I had their story lines and pseudonyms, I invented general physical characteristics so I could picture them sitting around the conference room table, interacting with me and each other. Then, I listened and transcribed relevant, applicable moments from the full second round of sessions to help flush out scenarios, round out the characters, and demonstrate what it was like to be in the room while group took place. Using verbatim dialogue, stories, and commentary, I molded seemingly random and jumbled bits and pieces into a fluid, coherent narrative.

For the story to take shape, I needed to craft a beginning, middle, and end that did not seem to exist when I was caught up in the actual facilitation of groups (Carr, 1986). Our story needed structure and sequence to help sweep the reader forward (Hart, 2011). I turned myself into a character in *The Story of Group* (Lopate, 2013). There are three positions from which one writes their character: fixed, subjective, and textual (Goodall, 2000). My fixed position was that of a lower-middle class, educated, fifty-something year old, Caucasian woman. My subjective position was that of someone who has never personally experienced homelessness, has not been labeled addict, and has never been arrested, but who has suffered loss and trauma. My textual position unfolded as I wrote. I used humor where appropriate and metaphors to help elucidate emotion and understanding. I demonstrated reflexivity through "notes to self" and questions I asked in an effort to invite readers into my thought process.

Once *The Story of Group* was developed, I went back through and altered the men's personal details to help protect their anonymity. I made choices to leave out certain specifics that revealed the identity of a participant or that made the final story unruly and overwhelming. Intertwining stories from multiple participants to create each composite character's backstory, I changed ages, the gender of significant characters in their stories, and details about specific locations they may have mentioned. I re-read through the entire story as each chapter took shape to ensure the characters were solid and well-rounded. Pass after pass, I added to the story, incorporating my own thoughts, feelings, reflections, and analysis about group processes, facilitation, participants, and outcomes.

For the conclusion, I transcribed three individual follow up meetings I had with past participants. While each participant and I met alone, I imagined a conversation between those three participants and me in order to write this analysis in the form of a group dialogue. To continue the engagement and connection my audience may have formed with the characters I created, I incorporated actual dialogue as well as observations and findings from my research instead of doing a traditional analysis and discussion. I incorporated an afterthoughts section to address lingering issues or unresolved considerations.

My work strives to explore new ways to use the discipline of Communication in combination with the benefits of Group Work to develop another layer of understanding and assistance for those who struggle with trauma and problems of living, "conflicting human needs, aspirations, and values" (Szasz, 1961, pg. 117). I hope I have done my participants justice. I hope I've cultivated compassion and understanding for those who struggle with addiction through making room for readers to see a connection back to themselves and their lived experiences (Behar, 1996).

I saved the section on ethics for last. My reason is that I am not yet settled and do not yet feel entirely resolved about the ethics regarding the stories I told and how others are implicated.

### **Ethics**

The ethics of my work has already been addressed in the *Introduction*, throughout *The Story of Group*, and in the above *Methods and Methodology* section. But I have more to add here, as I finalize my dissertation. Ethics must be considered on several fronts: relationship, interpretation, and research (Josselson, 2013). My participants were the first and main priority as I facilitated groups and as I wrote and rewrote the final draft of my dissertation. Brinkmann and Kvale (2008) write, “an experienced interviewer’s knowledge of how to create rapport and get through a participant’s defenses may serve as a ‘Trojan horse’ to get inside areas of a person’s life where they were not invited” (pp. 268-269). As I elicited my participants’ stories, I was cautious to not push too hard and to allow them the freedom to say what they wanted to say and stop if they felt uncomfortable.

While creating *The Story of Group*, I was careful to hide my participants’ identities and mask the horrors they had experienced by changing key details. However, as I wrote myself into the story of group, I am the one character whose confidentiality and privacy will not be protected—meaning that in addition to revealing things about myself, my parents, siblings, children, and friends might find themselves written onto the pages of my dissertation. It didn’t cost only me “the luxury of anonymity” (Boylorn, 2016a, p. 48), but those close to me could also pay the price. As researcher and autoethnographer, my stories, the stories I told to model the healing benefits of journaling and storytelling, implicated my intimate others (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I knew this going in but kept it in the back of my mind as I worked to finish this

project and do justice to the men who were the main characters. I started by writing “the version (my loved ones) would never read” (Boylorn, 2016b, p. 14).

I could not understand the impact on loved ones of what I had written until I read my words through another person’s eyes, my advisor, who challenged me to ask additional ethical questions of my work. I realized I took into account relational ethics—norms and practices tied to including and caring for others in our writing (Ellis, 2007) as it pertained to my participants, but not my family or friends. Realizing this, I read through and found ways to soften and smooth potentially damaging or personal details my intimate others might not want me to share. I struggled though. How can I show rapport building, the ways the participants connected with me, if I do not recount the stories I told while running group? How can the reader know the context of my work if I omit my inner thought process? How can I tell in thick detail what I’ve learned, how I’ve changed, where I’m going, if I cannot fully disclose where I’ve been?

My main concern is with the vignettes I tell about my life that include moments spent with my son. I could have left them as I initially wrote them. Lamott (2012) posted to Facebook,

You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories, just change their height and hair color. No one ever once has recognized him or herself in my fiction. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should've behaved better.

Fine advice if I lived in a vacuum or didn’t care about my intimate others. But my son, daughter, and additional identifiable others who appear in my stories are implicated; changing details cannot camouflage my children or parents. Lopate (2013) says this does not mean we should refrain from writing the story, including the details, and implicating the intimate others; but warns we should be prepared to face the consequences of our choices. While I do not use my children’s names, ensuring they will not show up in Google searches, they show up and are recognizable characters to anyone who knows me and us.

After conversations with colleagues and discussions with my mentor, I informed my son that I included stories about him and his sister in my dissertation paper. He asked what I meant. After hearing one example, he asked me if I considered the embarrassment of having been invited to my presentation and defense knowing I had written about him and included him in my work. I had not considered the impact. I inhaled sharply. *How had I not?*

I then asked if he wanted to read the passages that concern him. I told him he could let me know what he thinks, what I can keep, and what he'd like me to change (Ellis, 1999; Tamas, 2011). Lopate (2013) says showing our stories to those involved and giving them the option to make revisions gives away power and shifts the ethical burden onto them. Perhaps, but still, it is the only way I can live with myself. Even as I write these paragraphs, I further implicate my son.

We scheduled a time to continue the conversation. In preparation to meet him, I scoured the almost three hundred pages searching for the moments he shows up, reading through again and again, carefully, further softening, removing offending details, and seeing my words through his eyes. I am struck by the variety of ways stories can be read and interpreted—through the author's eyes, an editor's eyes, readers' eyes, and finally, the (unwitting) character's eyes.

~ ~ ~

*I print all the pages where he shows up in my story and set the package by the front door so as not to forget it on my way to meet him. He calls me later in the day and tells me there's no need to meet, to go ahead, and do what I have to do. He says he knows how much effort I put into my project and does not want me to have to do more work. I offer to read him the final scene in which he appears. Am I trying to absolve myself somehow? When I'm done, he lets out a breath I imagine he had been holding the whole while I read.*

*"Now that's some personal shit," he says.*

*“Do you feel hurt?” I ask.*

*“Not hurt,” he says. “Maybe mad or exposed, like I want to distance myself from you.”*

*We sit in silence on the phone. I don’t want to push in either direction.*

*“You know what, leave it alone, Mom. It is what it is. It’s definitely not one of my proudest moments, but it’s not like it’s not the truth.”*

*“I can change the character into a nephew or something like that,” I offer.*

*“Then it would be a lie,” he says.*

*I tell him I’ll be working on it for a few more days and if he changes his mind to call me back and let me know. We hang up after tentative I love you’s.*

*Ten minutes later, the phone rings. Now I’m the one holding my breath.*

*“Hey sweetie,” I say.*

*“Hey Mom, leave it the way it is. You’ve done a lot; you’ve worked really hard and been doing this a long time. I don’t want you to have to change anything.”*

*“I feel like you are giving me a gift right now. Is that what I’m hearing?”*

*“Yep, just do me a favor and leave me out of it next time.”*

*~ ~ ~*

Unlike the participants, my intimate others, specifically my son, did not realize he’d show up in my dissertation. He makes a few appearances on the pages because exploring my life and my stories as they related to participants’ lives and stories matters to the project. Telling stories showing who I am as mother, as daughter, as sister, and friend, is how I connected to and gained the trust and respect of my participants. My son did give me permission to proceed based on what I’ve told him. He did not ask to know more. What will happen if he reads the whole dissertation? Will he worry our joint stories will continue to be kindling to fuel my life’s work?

If he asks, I'll explain our joint stories can "be important for others," (Ellis, 2001, p. 599) for thinking about addiction, suicide, and parenting relationships. In saying those words to him, will he believe I think others and what they can learn is more important than he is to me, how he feels, and our relationship? Tamas (2011) wrote about family pain inflicted upon her and her children, and while she worried writing about it might cause them further pain, she hoped it could also give them a chance to make sense of their own suffering. In my work, I run the risk of my son seeing himself as the cause of my suffering and *still* not understanding his own suffering.

If he were to read the whole story, I hope the love I feel for him would shine through the words I wrote. Maybe he'd find himself in the stories the men told, before they had DUIs and criminal records, before they felt like they ran out of chances, before they were labeled "addict." Maybe he'd see himself through my eyes, his potential, his value and worth. Maybe he'd recognize himself in my stories and understand how we are not so different, how I am not judging him, but instead see I understand his struggles because of my own.

I could argue with any who object to including intimate others in my work that I told *my* truth as it relates to the thoughts, feelings, fears, and hopes I experience as a mother. It is not until this moment, as I'm writing these thoughts that I wonder what my daughter will think of how I portrayed her brother, how she'll feel about not appearing more frequently on the pages, if she'll feel relief, or jealousy. Will she worry about becoming the subject of a future paper because of how freely the story of my son flowed from my fingertips? I have no answers. To write autoethnographically means putting our relational lives on the (story)line. For the purposes of this project, I have my children's permission. My hope is that the benefits of sharing these stories far outweigh any costs they or we might incur. Moving forward, my children and I will negotiate which stories to tell and how our joint stories will be told.



## Appendix 7: IRB Letter of Approval



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX(813)974-7091

1/23/2015

Lisa Spinazola  
Communication,  
4202 E. Fowler Avenue, CIS1040  
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**  
IRB#: Pro00020025  
Title: Guided Journaling Workshop

**Study Approval Period: 1/23/2015 to 1/23/2016**

Dear Ms. Spinazola:

On 1/23/2015, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Guided Journaling Study Protocol.docx](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[Guided Journaling Workshop Adult IC minimal risk.docx.pdf](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review

category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John A. Schinka, Ph.D." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board