

SILENT STORIES AND PUZZLED PARADIGMS: A REFLEXIVE  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF IDENTITY, MOTHERHOOD, AND DOMINANT  
DISCOURSE

A DISSERTATION

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## DEDICATION

Chiseled on the side of a building on the campus of Texas Woman's University is a quote attributed to Sir Isaac Newton; "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." For more than three years I have passed this building on my way to class, for more than three years these words have been my anthem of commitment and strength. Though the sidewalk is simple, adorned only with a bench and a few trees, the walk from the parking structure to Woodcock Hall has represented a journey that I share with those who have gone before me; always a reminder of the giants on whose shoulders I have leaned on, cried on, and stood upon.

I dedicate this dissertation to Marilyn Kruse who was tireless in her commitment to the completion of my undergraduate studies. She shared her story and her strength with me; always encouraging me to author my own story, find my own strengths. She created, bent, and extended opportunities that made it possible for me to complete my bachelor's degree instead of declare defeat. I have no idea how, or why, she held me so tight. I do know that without her I would not be writing this today.

To Marilyn, a giant among giants.

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To my village, thank you for your shoulders. May we, forever, lift and stand.

## ABSTRACT

TREISHA PETERSON, M.S.

### SILENT STORIES AND PUZZLED PARADIGMS: A REFLEXIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF IDENTITY, MOTHERHOOD, AND DOMINANT DISCOURSE

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Identity development continues across the lifespan, revisited as transitions spark new beliefs and life experiences demand new ways of being; a re-examination of old patterns, beliefs, relationships, and visions of what one might become (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Meca et al., 2020; Piotrowski, 2020). The purpose of this research is to explore the concept of self and identity for a mother when the maternal role includes the discrepant identity exploration of adolescent offspring.

Maternal identity is an amalgamation of roles, responsibilities, and attitudes that can be disrupted when sudden changes or challenges exceed an individual's perceived coping and reasoning skills (Piotrowski, 2020; Praherso et al., 2017; Stanley & Stanley, 2017). These disruptions often become moments of crisis; turning points where group membership is questioned and previously held beliefs and patterns of behavior are re-considered in exchange for new ways of thinking, being, believing, and becoming (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Fossas, 2019; Praherso et al., 2017).

Data for this autoethnographic research are gathered from artifacts dated between 2015–2021; drawn from personal journal entries, yoga class notes, voice recorded notes, and hand drawn doodles. Revisiting one's identity, middle stage mothers are at increased

risk of internalizing responsibility, resulting in a cycle of shame and self-blame. Through reflection or rumination, an individual will craft a storied narrative of self and other that provides the backdrop for the event-related outcomes that pave the path to stagnation or transformative meaning making that impacts mental health, relational satisfaction, well-being, and one's sense of self (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2017; Meca et al., 2020; van Halen et al., 2020).

Results from this study illustrate that the significant and mundane moments may result in seismic and subtle paradigm shifts that can wreak havoc on middle-stage maternal identity and domain specific distress (Li et al., 2019; Luthar, 2015; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Meca et al., 2020). Offering an analysis of the lived experience of self and identity, this research concludes with implications for help professionals and future research.

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## PREFACE

### A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The decision to apply autoethnography as the methodology for my dissertation is one that I pursue with gratitude and a sense of great responsibility. My gratitude includes the support from professors, advisors, and committee members who encouraged me to stretch my thinking and challenge my assumptions throughout my doctoral coursework and dissertation preparation. I have an indebted gratitude for the doctoral students at Texas Woman's University who have gone before me in applying an autoethnographic methodology for their own dissertation research (Dollar, 2018; Levasseur, 2017). Reading these works, in preparation for my own dissertation, offered me an introduction to this methodology that has no pre-paved roadmap.

In addition to this gratitude, I have felt a great sense of responsibility. Though autoethnography has been utilized by many doctoral students on this campus, this research study is the first autoethnography to be presented to the Human Development, Family Studies, and Counseling department to fulfill a dissertation requirement. It is not lost on me that a gap in the shared language of structure, rigor, and validity that is exacted on traditional quantitative and qualitative methodology may create a chasm that is difficult to navigate for the reader who might be new to autoethnography as methodology. It was a similar gap in shared language that led me to apply autoethnography to answer this studies research questions.

I have been teaching about adolescent identity exploration, perfectionism, and religiosity for several years. Every time that I taught a class, presented at a workshop, or coached a personal client women would share very personal stories of their own children who were struggling with anxiety, depression, self-harm, gender issues, sexuality, and addiction. Each discussion would leave me pondering the identity exploration and lived experience of each of these women. It was in listening to these women share their stories that I realized the similarities to my own felt self; similarities that suggested that a woman's sense of self and identity may be dramatically altered during the identity exploration of adolescent offspring.

An initial literature review revealed a significant gap in the empirical conversation surrounding maternal identity across the lifespan. Like the smoke wafting from a candle's burn or the fog rising off of the early morning dew there was a deeper essence of the phenomenon of the lived experience of selfhood that neither quantitative nor qualitative research methods seemed to have full access to. Dahlberg (2006) suggested that the essence of phenomena lies in the everyday moments of the living experience. As difficult to hold as the smoke and the dew, the essence of essence cannot be added to a research design, it must be discovered within the individual lifeworld and the emotive living of everyday life (Adams et al., 2017; Chang, 2016a; Chang, 2016b; Dahlberg, 2006).

A hybrid of qualitative research and claiming allegiance to no single or specific discipline of study, autoethnography is an empirical research method that utilizes transformative and constructivist worldviews in order to give voice to the silent and draw

attention to the shadows (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

Acting as a bridge between science and the creative expression of self, autoethnography claims access to the intimate and liminal spaces of emotion, lived experience, and cultural context (Chang, 2016a; Ettore, 2017; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Often paired with feminist theoretical principles, autoethnography places the experience of self within cultural context in order to elevate understanding, reveal harmful narratives, and explore the experience of dissonance or discrepancy (Adams et al., 2017; Chang, 2016b; Ettore, 2017).

The intention of autoethnography as methodology is four-fold:

- Illustrate aspects of personal experience in order to illuminate cultural phenomena, practices, and/or narratives,
- Weave current and past research with lived experience in a way that contributes to the scholarship of existing and future research,
- Embrace personal vulnerability with purpose to expose stigmatized experiences that are often outside of the reach of quantitative measures and qualitative frameworks,
- Merge creative and scientific writing in order to create a reciprocity and response between the researcher and the reader (Jones et al., 2016).

There are three aspects of autoethnography that may act as guideposts for those who are new to autoethnography as empirical methodology. First, data are collected from the researchers personal experiences (Adams et al., 2017; Chang 2016b). Second, the intent of an autoethnography is to expand understanding and/or reveal cultural meanings

(Chang, 2016a; Ettore, 2017). And third, the process of doing and disseminating an autoethnography is as varied as the researcher (Chang, 2016a). For the purposes of a guiding the readers' journey through the nuances associated with an autoethnography, I offer the following roadmap.

Chapters 1 through 3, of this dissertation, follow a more traditional dissertation format. Chapter 1 presents an introduction to the research problem, purpose, and questions guiding this study. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature and chapter 3 offers an introduction to autoethnography as methodology. The data for this autoethnographic dissertation is presented as an exploration of the experience of my sense of self and identity. At this point, the autoethnographic dissertation veers away from a five-chapter format.

Chapters 4 through 10 introduce the essence of selfhood and identity as revealed by the data and artifacts; combining of research, creative writing, and personal journal entries, the intent of these chapters is to reveal the cultural and societal narratives that were pervasively influencing my perception of selfhood within my maternal role (Adams et al., 2017; Chang, 2016b; Ettore, 2017; Welch et al., 2020). An introduction of paradigm shifts replaces a theme analysis in chapter 11, where a synthesis of the data are presented, and trends and issues of current literature are explored.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Curating Identity**

Change and challenge can be considered critical and expected throughout all stages of an individual's growth and development. Through both the mundane and the significant, life is shaped by the daily events of an individual's life. Gathered over time, one's identity and concept of self is a curation of social transactions, experienced emotions, and meanings associated with the reflected past, the felt present, and the forecasted future (Ciciolla et al., 2014; Lewin et al., 2019; Stewart & Wolodko, 2016). Triggered by significant life events or chronic stressors, a disparity between the actual self and one's sense of ideal or ought-self may increase risk of mental, emotional, and spiritual imbalance that results in a changing of beliefs, personal pursuits, and growth perspectives (Knight, 2016; Mathew et al., 2014; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

#### **Shaping Motherhood**

Across the lifespan, there is a bi-directional and concurrent parent-child influence on well-being outcomes that can amplify this imbalance when a family is under distress (Eaton et al., 2016; Hein et al., 2018; Swart & Apsch, 2014). Wrought with conflict and contrast, mothers of a developing adolescent may find themselves caught between trusting the identity exploration process and a desire to protect their children from undesirable life outcomes.

Complicating this conflict are the social narratives that have perpetuated a negative dialog about maternal overreach with labels of helicopter and lawnmower mothers that paint the image of a mother who is overly invested in the success and proper grooming of their children. As key partners in the transition from childhood to adulthood, middle-stage motherhood can be a delicate balance between letting go and holding on (Kolbuck et al., 2019; Small & Metler, 2020). This balance can teeter easily when stressors exceed perceived resources and tax coping skills, resulting in negative self-appraisals and maladaptive identity disruption, even within the most well-functioning of families (Meca et al., 2020; Ozturk et al., 2019). Prone to self-blame, shame, and extended worry, maternal well-being, life satisfaction, and self-efficacy are compromised for a mother of an adolescent child whose identity-seeking stage includes distressed or discrepant lived experience (Piotrowski, 2020; Zucker et al., 2014).

### **Shaping My Motherhood**

You can't go back and make a brand-new start, but you can start right now and make a brand-new ending.

—James Sherman, *Rejected: How to survive rejection and promote acceptance*

As I glance back, through the rear-view mirror of life lived and lessons learned through experience, there are conversations with my children that I would change, life skills that I would have taught, and social beliefs that I would have unraveled. I have wrestled with the chaos of the guilt and shame narrative that perverts the role of mothers while, simultaneously, being a student of the hope, grace, and stillness of contemplative

practices. I have walked the fine line between doing my best and wishing I had known better; known different, known more. I have pulled on both sides of the rope as a mental game of tug-of-war was waging tension between what I believed and how I felt about my selfhood, my motherhood, and the likelihood of belonging to a life that felt so unfamiliar and far from what I had envisioned. Through the years, and after many tears, I am learning that looking back must be done with intention to grow forward. There is little rest for a mother's weary heart that ruminates over what should have, or could have, been done differently.

Drawing from my own life experiences, this research examines the physical, emotional, spiritual, mental, and relational toll often exacted from a mother of adolescent children whose identity-seeking years include felt discrepancy and chronic daily distress. Applying theories of identity development across the lifespan and a feminist theoretical framework, this autoethnography explores the journey of self and identity of a mother whose lived experience is in sharp contrast to the expectations and opinions of norms ascribed by dominant popular and cultural discourses of motherhood. Pervasive and persistent, hegemonic ideologies had shaped my experience of motherhood long before the birth of my first child. Disentangling from the shame, guilt, and blame narrated by intense mothering ideologies resulted in a lost sense of self that disrupted every aspect of my perceived lifeworld identity.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Many aspects of the maternal role during the identity-seeking years have taken a dramatic shift in an era wrought with emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual distress

among adults and adolescents. A lifelong role with weighty responsibilities, motherhood often requires a significant amount of time, energy, and emotional resources; resources that are often limited, overburdened, or entirely depleted (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Sheldon et al., 2018). For middle-stage mothers, taxed resources can be quickly depleted by the additional stressors that accompany caring for a child experiencing distress. Distorted perceptions of self-blame and shame increase stress levels and decrease prosocial behaviors among mothers whose child traverses the oft-felt loneliness, peer-rejection, anxiety, and depression of the adolescent journey (Benjamin et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019). In addition to seeking professional care and advocating for support for their children, mothers of adolescent children may experience a sense of low parenting self-efficacy and elevated levels of parental fatigue and overwhelm that can compromise mental health, social relationships, and life satisfaction (Meca et al., 2020; Piotrowski, 2020; Sheldon et al., 2018; Solholm et al., 2019).

Nearly 13 years separates the birthdates between my oldest child and my youngest child. Far more than simply an age difference, this 13-year span has been quite remarkable in the polarity of their life experiences throughout the adolescent years. Though there are some similarities, nearly every aspect of the development of their physical, social, emotional, and spiritual selves has been radically unique and vastly different from one another. Throughout these identity-formative years, parenting skills and family patterns that were successful in supporting my oldest child were outdated or ineffective in supporting my youngest child. An ever-evolving increase in home-based technology, digital connectivity, and social media use combined with the rising risks and

expectations of a global community has changed the psychological experience of adolescents and young adults (Li et al., 2019; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012). Herculean is the task of keeping pace with the technological, social, and environmental changes that have drastic impact on felt identity and adolescent well-being (Bjork-James, 2015; Sodexo, 2017).

Despite the prolonged transition from adolescence to adulthood, the complexity of identity-seeking, and the prevalence of rising rates of adolescent distress, little is known about the mental health costs and identity disruptions associated with mothering throughout this developmental stage (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012). Across the lifespan, identity involves a dynamic narrative; a release and revisiting of one's sense of self within the context of socialization, lived experience, and self-exploration (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Ridley, 2015; Stanley & Stanley, 2017). Disruptions to felt-identity can lead to identity crisis when an individual experiences a life event that results in an inability to reconcile their subjective sense of self with their expressive self within personal, professional, or social domains (Balkaya-ince et al., 2020; Cyr et al., 2015; Piotrowski, 2020; Praherso et al., 2017). Identity commitment is fragile and can be disrupted when challenging life circumstances and environments exhaust or exceed one's coping skills, resources, and social identification (Benjamin et al., 2019; Praherso et al., 2017; Sheldon et al., 2018).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study's purpose is the exploration of the essence and experience of self and identity for a mother of adolescents whose identity-seeking stage includes distressed or

discrepant lived experiences. Current empirical dialog provides incomplete vignettes about the experience of self and identity for mothers across the lifespan. Given the pervasive and rapidly rising rates of adolescent distress and negative well-being outcomes, empirical literature is scant on the experience of motherhood during the, often, tumultuous adolescent identity-seeking years (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Meca et al., 2020; Romano & Gervais, 2018; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). There is a significant gap at the intersection of identity development, maternal well-being, significant life events, and hegemonic ideologies that is critical to explore.

An interrogation of my lived experiences, this autoethnography explores the personal phenomenon of selfhood. Framed during a time when my experience with motherhood was laden with the challenges, obstacles, and role negotiations of my adolescent children's distressed identity, this empirical work locates the stories of my experience in the research with the intention to transcend and change ideologies and stigmas (Ettorre, 2017). The vulnerability and courage required for an autoethnographic work lies in the exposure of one's innermost thoughts and self-narratives (Ettorre, 2017; Forber-Pratt, 2015). Baring that which is often left unspoken, this study shares my voice with the intention to pave the way for others to do the same. The purpose of this study is three-fold:

1. To give voice to a woman's lived experience of self when the maternal role includes navigating the distressed or discrepant identity-seeking of adolescent offspring.

2. To introduce the criticality of interweaving empirical dialog with the phenomenon of lived experience of selfhood for motherhood framed within cultural and societal hegemonic ideologies, expectations, and public appraisals.
3. To explore the unexplored phenomena of meaning making and moments of impact on maternal identity in middle-stage motherhood.

Borrowing from phenomenological methods, this study applies a lifeworld and creative narrative approach to investigate my identity exploration as a middle-stage mother. Reflecting on critical moments and experiences, this autoethnography delves into my journey with distressed identity as a mother of six identity-seeking adolescents. Blending scientific and creative writing, this is a lived account of navigating the changes and challenges of my felt sense of self and belonging while caring for the needs of my distressed children. Reflections for this study are drawn from my personal journal entries, voiced memos, and reflective thoughts that I often shared with my yoga clients. The data is gathered from written and recorded reflections that span the life events and memories from a 6-year period between 2015–2021. As I sorrowed over stories that were not mine to share and swallowed words and emotions that were not socially acceptable to express, I was weighed down by a societal ideal that felt everything but ideal.

### **Paradigm Statement**

No one is born fully-formed; it is through self-experience in the world that we become what we are.

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*

At the heart of one's identity is the assimilation of self and other. Viewed through the lens of constructivist and transformational theories, this is an exploration of how the experiences and emotions of life can influence, guide, and inform an individual's perception of self throughout adulthood. Out of the clay gathered from the experiences, emotions, and personal relationships of life, an individual forms their beliefs, adapts behaviors, and creates a vision of becoming that informs their felt identity and concept of self. Often held without cognitive appraisal, one's view of self is subject to the meanings associated with daily hassles and significant life events as related to personal relationships, experiences, and emotions (Kegan, 2000; Lewin et al., 2019; Young, 2013). As situations arise in life that challenge previously held beliefs and behaviors, an individual may apply a new, and transformational, lens with which to view themselves and their lifeworld. No longer subject to previously held beliefs, an individual might explore new ways of believing, adopt new ways of being, and forge new ways of becoming.

An exploration of domain specific identity calls for an understanding of how societal narratives, cultural norms, and a fundamental need for belonging influence identity stability, exploration, and disruptions across the lifespan (Luyckx et al., 2016; Marin & Shkreli, 2019). More than a distinct achieved destination, identity and selfhood are constructed over time and through lived experience. Intricately woven with the threads of time, emotions, relationships, and circumstances one's sense of self is subjective and always evolving as a result of lived experience, new perspectives, and societal expectations (Engebretsen & Bjorbaekmo, 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

Dynamic and fragile, one's identity can quickly unravel when significant life events result in a felt discrepancy between the experience of self and the definitions of self (Brousseau et al., 2020; Hardy et al., 2017; Sheldon et al., 2018).

Within the circumstances of each of my children's identity journeys lie a wide range of emotions, questions, and doubts that belonged to my lived experience. Often left unspoken and coupled with consistent rumination, many of my experiences became narrated by negative self-appraisals of shame, self-blame, and guilt as I found evidence written by the societal and cultural narratives of my lifeworld; messages of where I had failed and how I could have or should have done better. Fragmented and alienated from my previous concept of self, my lifeworld was disrupted by the essence of lost aspects of my own identity. Imbalanced and uncertain, previously held beliefs that I had trusted and held firm were in question as my lived experience drifted further away from the expectations and assumptions of my family, my community, and my vision of a future.

### **Background of the Researcher**

If something goes wrong with or for our children, it's a reflection on us as mothers.

—Judith Warner, *Perfect madness: Motherhood in the age of anxiety*

With the clarity and perspective afforded only by hindsight and self-reflection, I have come to realize that I did not originally choose my research topic out of passion or purpose. Nor was my empirical inquiry originally driven by intellectual curiosity or a need for public policy. The focus of my graduate study and academic journey was birthed from the very basics of human emotion and survival instinct. I was a mom of six children, all of whom were expressing one, or more, signs of anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-

harm, and gender negotiation. Seeded in my heart and rooted out of necessity, this autoethnographic study originated with my desire to understand a phenomenon that manifested itself in the corners, closets, and shadows of my home. Having checked all of the societal and cultural narratives of being a “good” mother, I was ill-prepared to navigate the emotional and spiritual anxiety that my children expressed. Nor did I understand the depths of their physical and mental depression, the felt loneliness that seemed to prevent their social connections, and their propensity for self-medicating and harming ideation. Upstream, and without paddles, my mother’s heart had only two instincts; fight for knowledge or flee with blind naiveté. Flight, I admit, was my first instinct.

Instead, I opted to arm myself with knowledge, rigor, and a desire to dust the corners, clean out the closets, and shed light into the shadows of the many facets of discrepant identity exploration for today’s adolescents. This research comprises the stories and narratives of my maternal experience between 2015–2020. During this time period, my six children were at various stages of the identity exploration stage. Though each one of my six children experienced discrepant identity-seeking, each of their journeys includes a unique blend of challenges and distresses. Throughout these years, I was a graduate student in family studies, a yoga instructor, and a trauma-informed embodied coach specializing in stress, health, and wellness. Prior to this time, I had been a stay-at-home mom for 25 years, active in my religious congregation, a volunteer in my community, and president of our school district booster club.

My background with this topic is informed by the complex and interwoven layers of my lived experience combined with research. My academic journey often informed the messages I shared in my yoga classes and, frequently, my academic projects contained whispers of yoga-informed philosophies. In like manner I must mention that my empirical queries are often informed by my own experience with self-doubt, maternal fears, and uncertainty with my identity experiences. Throughout my doctoral studies, my lived experience informed the subject matter of my journey as a researcher. In addition, I find it critical to disclose that had I believed my distressed identity experience to be an exception, I am uncertain that I would have considered this the topic for my research.

Like so many women whose lived experience is contrary to pervasive milieus, I might have continued to silence my experience and closet my stories (Lamar et al., 2019). Risking the discomfort of vulnerability and trusting my audience, I began sharing my story within the context of my studies with my yoga classes. Finding courage from the response of my yoga students, I began sharing personal vignettes in classes, at conferences, and with my peers as we considered research topics. Ironically, it was through sharing my closeted stories that I came to realize the pervasive complexity of the experience of identity and motherhood while simultaneously supporting an adolescent offspring through discrepant identity-seeking.

### **Rationale for Autoethnography**

Vulnerabilities aside, I am a storyteller. I learn best through story, and I teach best with stories. In the years since the completion of my master's degree, I have spoken and taught about self-discrepancy, identity, perfection, and the increasing prevalence of

adolescent physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental distress. At the conclusion of these events, participants would approach me to share the story of their child's experience with identity distress. With grace and compassion far beyond what I had afforded myself, I heard their stories of overcoming obstacles and stories of wading through deep and unexpected mire. After every story shared, I was left with the weight of one critical and, seemingly, unasked question, "What about Mom?" What is mom's experience of her own identity in the midst of all of the worry, fear, and stress of their child's identity journey? In contrast to a plethora of social and empirical dialog focused on today's adolescent distress, the inquiry is scant for the experience of middle-stage mothers and maternal identity. With so many closets, closed doors, and lurking shadows, it is imperative that empirical exploration include the concept of self and identity for mothers within the lived experience of being, believing, and becoming in a world filled with shoulds, coulds, and ought to haves.

My original intention was to utilize a reflective lifeworld methodology for this research. Confident that I could successfully bridle my lifeworld experience, I proceeded with a review of the literature. While crafting a methodological approach, van Manen suggests that researchers study a phenomenon that is of great interest; one that they can explore and reflect upon from multiple angles (Vagle, 2018). In exploring the many nuances and factors associated with one's sense of self-concept within the role of motherhood, it became apparent that this is a study for which there is limited shared language between the research and the potential participants. The literature on middle-stage maternal identity is scant and incomplete, the social narrative pervasively

ideological and laden with shame and guilt (Hein et al., 2018; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). To truly give voice to a woman's lived experience of self, I began to question, might I first need to find the voice of my lived experience of selfhood in the years that I navigated the uncharted journey of distressed or discrepant identity-seeking of my children?

### **Autoethnography as Methodology**

Those closest to me might argue that finding my voice is a challenge. However, many would agree that giving voice to my vulnerabilities has never been my strength. Vulnerabilities aside, I believe that stories matter. As a storyteller, I believe that our lifeworld is a collection of stories told, heard, and listened to and, through our stories we come to understand, assess, and communicate our sense of belonging to self and one another (Qvortrup & Nielsen, 2019). The core of my teaching philosophy lies in the power to cultivate meaning through shared stories that captivate students and transform the learning process. Similarly, the root of my personal philosophy is the belief that communal compassion and belonging are fostered through the stories we share, stories of struggles faced and obstacles overcome. Stories, those shared and those held private, are the narrative of self in relation to one's perception of self and other (Ridley, 2015). Through the exploration and meaning associated with the story of self, an individual can transform crisis into a sense of clarity and perspective that affords new ways of being, believing, and becoming (Cyr et al., 2015; Hardy et al., 2017; Meca et al., 2020).

Weaving theory and research with the stories and insights of my own lived experience, this autoethnography emphasizes the critical need to identify and support the

lived experience of self and identity within the maternal role. Instead of traditional observer-observed research methodology, autoethnography is a scientific opportunity to examine the experience of self within the power, privileges, and penalties ascribed by culture (Ettorre, 2017; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). The exploration and re-exploration of self is nuanced and ever evolving, informed by past and present experiences, relational others, community, and one's sense of future self (Balkaya-ince et al., 2020; Meca et al., 2020; Piotrowski, 2020).

Philosophical in nature and rooted with an anthropological lens, these nuances include one's perspective of daily hassles and significant life events as contextualized by the lived experience of emotion, relationships, and concept of self at the moment and processed over time (Boss et al., 2017; Chang, 2016a). More than the telling of a story, an autoethnography may incorporate a multiparadigmatic narrative that invites an exploration of the meaning making process and transformational power contained in the reflection and contemplation of a story from deep inside and high above (Qutoshi, 2015; Vagle, 2018). Difficult to quantify and often secreted in stories, a self-reflective, autoethnographic approach to this study offers potential to describe the meaning making experience of self and struggle within a cultural context (Adams et al., 2017; Ettorre, 2017; Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

### **Summary**

Empirical and popular discourse has neglected to address the domain-specific challenges of identity and felt discrepancy among mothers of adolescents whose identity exploration involves felt discrepancy and distressed life events. Applying

autoethnography as methodology, this research is an exploration of the concept of self and identity held within personal, cultural, and societal contexts of motherhood. Heavy laden by social stigma, a mother's sense of self can be lost within the cacophony of dominant discourse and hegemonic ideologies. To bring awareness to the experiences hidden by stigma it is critical to shed light on the silenced stories and expose the secreted struggles that burden one's felt sense of identity within the maternal role.

Through this study, I explore vignettes captured from my personal stories as I wrestled with hegemonic ideologies that shaped and reshaped my felt sense of self and identity. Through a self-reflexive narrative, this study embodies the authenticity and emotion of lived experience evidenced by qualitative and quantitative literature. As a work of art and science, autoethnography invites the curious to explore and the creative to ponder the heart and soul of an essence of the human experience with a phenomenon.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As a decades-long developmental stage, motherhood is often associated with tasks, responsibilities, and family changes that can expend a significant amount of time, energy, and emotional resources. A review of the literature points to dialog, from empirical to popular, rich with the myth of the ideal mom and the many personal, and relational, well-being costs associated with the transitions and challenges of motherhood (Henderson et al., 2016; Luthar, 2015; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

The focus of this review of the literature is to explore the connectedness of religiosity, perfectionism, and maternal identity. More specifically, this literature inquiry delves into the current empirical dialog on the mid-stage of motherhood, that of mothering during the highly transitory and identity-seeking years of adolescence.

#### **Search Procedures**

Initial computer searches accessed all databases within EBSCOHost from the Texas Woman's University Library System using specifications for full text and peer-reviewed journal articles. Initial research queries spanned peer-reviewed literature published between 2010–2020, using keywords, “well-being or wellbeing,” “religiosity or religion or spirituality,” “mother or mom or maternal or motherhood,” “perfectionism or perfect,” “contagion stress,” and “parental or parent identity.” Accessing all databases within Academic Search Complete, a secondary query was initiated using the aforementioned keywords in combination with keywords “discrepancy,” “feminism or

feminist,” and “ideal” resulting in the retrieval of articles reviewed for a more comprehensive overview of self-discrepancy, societal expectations, and the pervasive myth of motherhood.

Articles not available through Texas Woman’s University database required specific searches utilizing basic search within Academic Search Complete and were accessed via interlibrary loan request. In some instances, ResearchGate was utilized to access literature recently published and not yet available via EBSCOHost.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Within the science and study of family life, theories abound that offer a meaningful frame for an empirical query. Vital to a project about the lived experience of any member of a family is an inquiry into the concept of self within the context of family, relationships, community, culture, and society (van Halen et al., 2020). To begin a project about mom’s lived experience, it is critical to consider the complexities of developing a concept of self in motherhood. To honor the self in motherhood, this study begins with three key identity development theories: those of Erik Erikson, James Marcia, and Robert Kegan. To add a depth and breadth specific to mothering, this study draws from self-discrepancy theory and family systems theory.

### **Identity Development Theory**

More than a name, personal status, or group affiliation, identity is a complex construct of the perception and connection to an intrinsic sense of self. Identity informs an individual’s personality, developmental growth, roles, and relationships, giving meaning to the direction and purpose of one’s life experiences (Cyr et al., 2015;

Kasinath, 2013). Critical to psychological adjustment and social connectedness, an individual's sense of self is revisited many times, and at key transitional periods, across the lifespan (Meca et al., 2020; Praherso et al., 2017; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012).

General identity theory has informed a wide range of literature across the stages and changes of human development. Conflict within roles and with relational others can lead to identity conflict, confusion, or deficit resulting in a maladaptive relationship with self (Stanley, & Stanley, 2017; van Halen et al., 2020). For the purpose of this literature review, the development of self and identity is considered a lifelong pursuit that ebbs and flows through significant life events, normative transitions, and unexpected life experiences (Bentley et al., 2020; van Halen et al., 2020).

### ***Erik Erikson***

Laying a critical foundation for the study of an individual's sense of self, Erik Erikson provided a framework that unites human development and identity formation across the lifespan (Knight, 2016). Erikson's (1950) theory divides the cycle of development into eight stages, each defined by polar alternatives for identity resolution and marked by a personal crisis and significant turning point toward autonomous beliefs, values, and priorities (Klimstra et al., 2010; Knight, 2016; Marcia, 2002). Through a process of negotiation, integration, and resolution at each crisis stage, individuals develop new virtues and strengths that become a core component of the transition through the next stage of development. Synthesizing the past-self with the present-self, individuals maintain a sense of continuity as a new identity emerges through the formation of self-specified goals, plans, and beliefs (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Kroger et al., 2010).

### *James Marcia*

Through his work, Erikson laid a framework for understanding that a key developmental task is the process of discovering self that lies between identity and confusion. Elaborating on Erikson's, stage-specific theory of development, James Marcia conceptualized an identity status paradigm stating that the separation from parental and societal traditions and expectations relies on an exploration and commitment that is critical for successful identity formation (Klimstra et al., 2010; Kroger et al., 2010). Marcia proposed a paradigm with four distinct identity statuses; each status characterized by the level of exploration and commitment to beliefs, values, and priorities an individual completes for each of the key domain areas of identity (Bilsker & Marcia, 1991; Klimstra et al., 2010; Marcia, 2002). Like Erikson, Marcia's identity status paradigm continues into adulthood, each stage building from the last and serving as a precursor to the next.

In addition, Marcia suggested that identity development continues through all stages of adulthood, where psychological adjustment and movement between identity statuses may occur with cumulative life stressors and disequilibrium from any of the prior psychosocial stages (Marcia, 2002; Meca et al., 2020). Replacing exploration and commitment from the adolescent paradigm, Marcia (2002) suggested that the adult identity status paradigm is marked by different levels of intimacy, generativity, and integrity. Due to individual circumstances of stability and change, the cumulative nature of these circumstances, and the meaning associated with the circumstances, there can be a significant variance of adult identity status achievement across the lifespan (Marcia, 2002; Meca et al., 2020; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012).

**Parent Identity: Certainty-Uncertainty Model.** Beyond adolescence, identity is an exploration of beliefs, values, and priorities that can lead to a synthesized sense of current and future-self, informed by stability and change in domain, context, and time that often results in a fluid sway between identity synthesis and identity confusion across the lifespan (Boegarts et al., 2019; Cyr et al., 2015; van Halen et al., 2020). Throughout the ebb and flow of normative and non-normative transitions, an individual might fluctuate between maintenance, reconsideration, and abandonment of previously held beliefs, values, and commitments (Boegarts et al., 2019; Piotrowski, 2020; Young, 2013). More than a linear developmental process, parental identity often involves multiple role renegotiations and belief reappraisals that result in a cyclical process of commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration (Crocetti et al., 2008; Meca et al., 2020; Praharso et al., 2017).

Following Marcia's (1966) identity model, a parental-identity crisis might occur when meaning and purpose is upheaved by change or transition, stimulating a general, or domain-specific, reconsideration of beliefs, values, and commitments (Balkaya-ince et al., 2020; Cyr et al., 2015; Piotrowski, 2020; Praharso et al., 2017). In times of instability, insecurity, or change, an individual may cycle between commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration in an attempt to adapt to uncertainty, reframe life's upsets or strive for a more coherent sense of self and quality of life (Boegarts et al., 2019; Crocetti et al., 2008; Piotrowski, 2020). Identity confusion may result in negative well-being outcomes when reconsideration involves rumination about past commitments and fear, uncertainty, or unwillingness surrounding to consider new commitments (Meca et

al., 2020; Stanley & Stanley, 2017; van Halen et al., 2020). Adaptive identity is a choice-driven exploration that yields to a coherent sense of self, and integration of self within the roles and social contexts of the individual (Glatz & Trifan, 2019; Meca et al., 2020; Syed & McLean, 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

**Parent Identity 2: Depth & Breadth.** Perhaps a normative developmental transition for some, motherhood can foster significant identity changes where a woman's sense of self includes her role change and confidence as a caregiver interwoven with overall life satisfaction, social support, and internalized narratives of idealized societal standards for mothers (Henderson et al., 2016; Liss et al., 2013; Piotrowski, 2020). High in identity commitment, maternal identity synthesis might include a sense of confidence and self-efficacy towards choice-driven, intrinsically motivated roles, goals, and values (Boegarts et al., 2019; Cyr et al., 2015; Meca et al., 2020). Positively associated with anxiety, perfectionism, and depression, reconsideration may yield to a fragmented sense of self and identity confusion that fosters the internalization of guilt, shame, and fear of negative social evaluations (Boegarts et al., 2019; Liss et al., 2013; Meca et al., 2020).

Parental identity transformation, driven by normative transition or significant life change, may result in a redefinition of beliefs, values, and commitments where all aspects of the self are reevaluated and re-prioritized (Balkaya-ince et al., 2020; Marin & Shkreli, 2019; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012; Young, 2013). In reconsideration, and prior to a new commitment, an individual may pause current commitments while engaging in an in-breadth exploration of new ways of thinking, believing, and belonging (Boegarts et al., 2019; Cyr et al., 2015; Ridley, 2015). An in-depth exploration may occur when an

individuals' existing commitments are carefully evaluated, perhaps given new shape and new meaning to better align with current beliefs, social setting, and circumstances (Boegarts et al., 2019; Cyr et al., 2015; Luyckx et al., 2016). As integration of one's past, present, and future selves, long-term or unresolved identity integration might loop, rather than cycle as an individual experiences rumination, self-doubt, and uncertainty, failing to find a coherent sense of self (Ko et al., 2014; Luyckx et al., 2016; Marin & Shkreli, 2019; Syed & McLean, 2016).

### ***Robert Kegan***

Bridging the gap between identity and discrepancy is Robert Kegan's theory of adult transformational learning. Considered to be a constructive-developmental theory, Kegan's subject-object theory posited that adult identity becomes increasingly complex as an individual's relationship with self merges with relationships with others through life experiences, community, conditioning, and social roles (Bridwell, 2012; Fossas, 2019). Like the tides of the ocean, adult identity becomes an ebb and flow of commitment, renegotiation, and equilibrium; a fluid practice of constructing meaning from life's experiences, developing new constructs over time, and balancing that which is held as object and that which an individual is subject to (Bridwell, 2012; Lewin et al., 2019).

Applicable across the lifespan, Kegan posited that the construct of self is a highly individual progression towards maturation developed through the meaning-making process ascribed to one's unique goals, motives, and life experiences within the context of social, professional, and familial roles (Bridwell, 2012; van Halen, 2020; Young, 2013). Adult identity transformation may begin when a life event results in the re-

exploration of core beliefs, values, and priorities. When previously held ways of being are challenged, Kegan's subject-object model suggests that an individual will progress through a series of five meaning-making stages, from socialized to self-transforming, in order to explore, resolve, and assess a new way of thinking, being, believing, and becoming (Fossas, 2019; Kroger, 2002; Lewin et al., 2019; Silverstein, 2012; Young, 2013). Significant to this review are the meaning-making lenses defined by Kegan that shape lived experiences; lenses that, either impede or support the life stages, events, and transitions of adult development (Lewin et al., 2019).

### **Self-Discrepancy Theory**

Throughout the lifespan, the ability to articulate and relate to a clear sense of self is a vital component of identity, belonging, and positive well-being. Drawing from classical self-related theories, self-discrepancy theory postulates that there is an association between self-evaluation and emotional states; where perceived incongruencies between self and other yield specific psychological and emotional outcomes (Higgins, 1987; Hong et al., 2013). An individual's felt-discrepancy between actual-self and, either ideal (intrinsically motivated) or ought (extrinsically dictated) self-guides, can be domain-specific and has been attributed to a wide range of maladaptive trait beliefs such as fear, shame, isolation, doubt, and rumination (Busseri & Merrick, 2016; Mason et al., 2019; Meca et al., 2020).

### ***Self-Guides: Ought and Ideal***

Transitions across the lifespan can result in new role-specific experiences that yield an assessment of beliefs, values, and attitudes about self and the relationship with

relevant others. Psychological, emotional, and relational problems may occur when an individual encounters contrasting or ambiguous ideas about themselves (van Halen et al., 2020). Throughout the identity-seeking process, an individual achieves personal commitment to vocational, ideological, and sexual domains through sifting and sorting of personal preferences and societal expectations (Kroger, 2000; Kroger et al., 2010). Higgins (1987) offered a framework whereby distinct emotional effects arise from the perception of self throughout normative, and non-normative lifespan transitions.

Motivations, aspirations, and attributes of the actual self are measured against one of two prioritized self-guides. The ideal self is determined by those attributes or characteristics that an individual intrinsically desires or determines significant, where falling short may result in sadness, disappointment, or dissatisfaction (Busseri & Merrick, 2016; Hong et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2019). In contrast, the ought-self is extrinsically motivated by a fear of punishment or rejection and often determined by moral obligation or societal expectation (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Higgins, 1997). Psychological and emotional outcomes for individuals high in actual-ought discrepancy are associated with worry, fear, shame, and agitation, where a sense of failure and fear dictate one's perception of self (Hong et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2019). As a domain-specific construct, identity continues throughout the lifespan and is often revisited during periods of transition and significant life events (Meca et al., 2020).

### ***Self-Guides: Possible Selves***

As a theory of self and affect, self-discrepancy theory offers a model for understanding an individuals' sense of self, motivational state, and well-being outcomes.

Informed, not only by the past and present, but identity also involves integration of one's vision of a future-oriented self; assimilation reliant on beliefs, assumptions, motivations, and meaning-making (Ko et al., 2014; Marin & Shkreli, 2019). As an additional self-guide, the future-self is an envisioned interpretation of desired and undesired outcomes, experiences, and possibilities measured against the current image of self (Busseri & Merrick, 2016; Katz-Wise et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2014). Often anticipated to be an inclining trajectory, current life satisfaction is an amalgamation of the evaluation of the present self in relation to past experiences and anticipated future experiences (Busseri & Merrick, 2016).

Challenged by transitions or significant life events, images of future-self may be shrouded by uncertainty, punishment, or criticism that widens a chasm between actual/ideal-self. Life satisfaction decreases as the discrepancy chasm increases, where fear of the future drowns the present moment in frustration, discouragement, social disconnection, and hopelessness (Adams, 2015; Busseri & Merrick, 2016; Marin & Shkreli, 2019). To reconcile the discrepancy, an individual may engage in an in-depth exploration, willing to reconsider prior commitments, beliefs, and values (Alexandar & Higgins, 1993; Meca et al., 2020).

### **Family Systems Theory**

More than a shared bloodline or residence, the family is a complex and interconnected merging of personalities, trait characteristics, and temperaments. Within the family, an individual begins to formulate a unique sense of self and belonging, makes meaning of interactions, comes to understand traditions, and creates beliefs about trust,

unity, security, and navigating the challenges and stressors of life (Kiser et al., 1998; Palkovitz et al., 2014). Within the constructs of family systems theory, the family is a dynamic and interdependent system of roles, relationships, alliances, and sub-systems capable of adaptive organization and reorganization in the presence of change or challenges (Cox & Paley, 2003; Palkovitz et al., 2014).

Individual identity and the concept of selfhood are shaped by the processes, support, connection, and meaning making of family and group membership, especially at key transitional moments and through significant life events (Bentley et al., 2020; Cox & Paley, 2003; Kiser et al., 1998). As part of an interconnected system, the study and experience of one family member must be considered within the roles, relationships, and responsibilities within the greater family system (Cox & Paley, 2003; Hein et al., 2018; Rasmussen & Troilo, 2016; Silberg et al., 2018). Stimulating both adaptivity and vulnerability, families may reorganize roles and relationships in response to obstacles, distresses, and life transitions, where parent and child have a reciprocal influence on the peaks and valleys of safety, security, psychological well-being, and general life satisfaction of one another (Cox & Paley, 2003; Hein et al., 2018; Silberg et al., 2018; Von Culin et al., 2014).

### ***Feminist Theory***

So long as a family is successful at the renegotiation of roles, rules, and responsibilities, a family systems theoretical framework might suggest that the functions of mother and father are unique and separate, albeit interchangeable (Palkovitz et al., 2014). Far from interchangeable, motherhood is an identity; a complex amalgamation of

early gendered socialization, guided by societal expectations and the cultural, communal, and unspoken family rules, norms, and daily flow of routine (Lamar et al., 2019; Palkovitz et al., 2014; Pederson, 2016).

Pairing family systems theory with a feminist theoretical lens provides, both the floor and the walls, of the home with which maternal identity is established. Outside of chores, tasks, and to-do lists, the identity of a mother is closely tied to parenting, homemaking, and family outcomes (Adams, 2015; Hein et al., 2018; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016). Nearly 60 years after being declared “the problem that has no name” (Friedan, 1963, p. 1), the image of an ideal mother continues detrimental for the psychological well-being outcomes for the mother and for those with whom she has charge (Henderson et al., 2016; Lamar et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019).

A feminist perspective supports the exploration that the journey into, and through motherhood is not along the same path as that is traveled by men. Seeded images of motherhood, as a life course destination, are planted through social, cultural, and familial dialog long before a woman conceives (Adams, 2015; Fathi, 2018). From an early age, and across the lifespan, micro-narratives and social milieu dictate ideological rhetoric that prescribes, not only an ideal-self to women but also the ideal of her future-oriented self (Fathi, 2018; Henderson, 2016; O’Reily, 2019). To truly understand the lived experience of a mother, it is imperative to explore how being, and becoming, a mother has shaped a woman’s identity and how she assigns meaning to her sense of self in relation to proximal other (O’Reily, 2019; Pederson, 2016).

## **Motherhood**

Though rich and deep as stand-alone theories, the marriage of general identity theory, self-discrepancy theory, family systems, and feminist theory may reveal a maternal narrative of self and identity that is more cacophonous than harmonious. From popular media to playground prattle, not only is the pressure to be perfect normalized, but mother's performance also is highly criticized; if she hovers around her child, she is a "helicopter mom", if she prunes her child's way, she is a "lawnmower mom", and if she emphasizes high achievement she is a "tiger mom" (Ashton-James et al., 2013; Henderson et al., 2016; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). An invisible web of unspoken rules, social expectations, and pressure for perfection has created a habitus of what it means to be a mother that shapes what mom does and how she does it; it shapes how she believes and makes meaning of her selfhood within her maternal role (Brousseau et al., 2020; Fathi, 2018; Henderson et al., 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

In conjunction with the hegemonic ideology surrounding mom in her maternal role is the heavy burden of responsibility she carries for the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual well-being of each member of her family (Lamar et al., 2019). Media and entertainment have continued to perpetuate the narrative that motherhood is a child-centered role that presupposes all personal, professional, and social pursuits (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Meca et al., 2020; Yerkes et al., 2019). Compounding the energy expenditure and role overload of organizing, planning, and transporting children to and fro, intensive mothering ideologies have suggested that optimal child-rearing involves the abandonment of personal and professional pursuits in exchange for the unlimited

emotional, physical, and intellectual stimulation of her children (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Rizzo et al., 2013; Yerkes et al., 2019).

Though motherhood is a centuries-old societal milestone, one that marks a major life transition for many women, literature is notably scant on the maternal experience across the lifespan. Beyond the transition into parenthood, becoming a mother marks a complex, domain-specific role exploration that may result in identity decisions that challenge previously held social roles of self in personal, professional, and societal relationships (Adams, 2015; Luyckx et al., 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Socialized images of motherhood are often crafted at an early age, portraying women as innately more caring, protective, and sensitive, characteristics best suited for the rearing of children and support of family (Adams, 2015; Lamar et al., 2019; Takseva, 2019).

Like the peanut butter and jelly sandwich that she packs for lunch, the years between the first steps and final launch are often filled with the messiest experiences of motherhood and child rearing. Throughout the parenting years, a woman renegotiates her personal goals and motives to accommodate her role of mother, a role that demands that she deprioritize herself and invest copious personal and family resources in the nurture, care, and development of her children (Lamar et al., 2019; Meca et al., 2020; Takseva, 2019). Complicated by a juggling of multiple roles, self-doubt, ongoing resource expenditures, and complex expectations, maternal identity is a complex reformation of self that can result in a fragmented sense of self (Meca et al., 2020; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Growing with her child through childhood, adolescence, and the transition into adulthood, the role of a mother involves the “invisible labor” of

organizing, managing, and decision making where each stage of motherhood represents a new dimension of selfhood and restructuring of goals, priorities, and relationships (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Small & Metler, 2020).

Most frequently discussed within the context of the adolescent years, identity development is a lifelong process; an experiential progression of self that is repeatedly revisited as life transitions elicit change and challenge that continue well into late adulthood (Cyr et al., 2015; Kasinath, 2013; Meca et al., 2020; Piotrowski, 2020; Syed & Seiffge-Krenke, 2012). As a critical component of life satisfaction and psychological adjustment, maternal identity is a dynamic representation of one's beliefs and attitudes about their role as a caregiver as defined by personal, familial and societal goals, motives, and expectations (Balkaya-ince et al., 2020; Piotrowski, 2020; Praherso, 2017; Rizzo et al., 2013).

### **Maternal Identity**

Identity is a dynamic, progressive, and lifelong developmental process; a fluid construct of how the self is experienced in relation to a myriad of factors that narrate how the self is defined. Both context-driven and domain-specific, identity is an experience of self that informs the overall quality of life, significantly impacting decision making skills, habits of coping with stressors, and one's internal narrative of self-efficacy (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Piotrowski, 2020; Ridley, 2015). More than the immediate experience of an actual or ideal-self, identity across the lifespan is a theory of self with which an individual perceives and makes meaning of the experiences of the past and the assumptions of an imagined or hoped for future (Brousseau et al., 2020; Hardy et al.,

2017; van Halen et al., 2020). Intricately woven by the threads of internal narrative, emotional responses, and the external world, identity maturation is a fragile knowing of self that is subject to strengthen or unravel through normative and non-normative change, transition, and crisis (Bridwell, 2012; Ridley, 2015; Stewart & Wolodko, 2016).

As a significant life transition, motherhood often necessitates an iteration process that reorganizes goals, beliefs, priorities, and motives unique to the individual and subject to self-perceptions, belief systems, socialization, and group affiliation (Kasinath, 2013; Meca et al., 2020; Stanley & Stanley, 2017; Piotrowski, 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Maternal identity achievement, more than a destination, is a dynamic construction of one's priorities, goals, and motives in conjunction with internalized messages of, what is perceived to be, the mommy ideal (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Fossas, 2019). Aligning with societal narratives and expectations, many women exchange personal and professional pursuits to invest in their children's growth, education, and activities (Bronstein & Steiner, 2015; Lamar et al., 2019; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). Without purpose and clarity, mothers can be caught in a maze of extrinsic expectations, an exchange that may result in a fragmented or a discrepant sense of self, where the pressure to "be" outweighs the pressure to "become" and mother loses confidence, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation (Hardy et al., 2017; Ridley, 2015; Syed & McLean, 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

Neither linear nor prescriptive, maternal identity maturation may involve a lived experience that is a mismatch of the individuals own ideals, goals, and priorities; caught in uncertainty and a ruminative exploration cycle that involves doubt, hesitation, and self-criticism (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Luyckx et al., 2016). In order to establish a coherency of

self that leads to self-actualization and flourishing, an individual's identity structure (the subjective sense of self) and identity content (objective sense of self) must be a reflection of their own ideals, goals, and priorities (Cyr et al., 2015; Hardy et al., 2017). As a concept of self, maternal identity is more than a sense of self within motherhood; maternal identity informs a mother's place in her social world and is subject to personal and social appraisals of her performance within her family roles as a child advocate, coach, nurse, academic support, and emotional guide (Fossas, 2019; Meca et al., 2020).

### ***The Mommy "Myth"***

Media and entertainment have offered a maternal script through images of motherhood that are pervasive and memorable. From flawless to perky and, always, put together, television and advertising have painted a portrait of the "ideal" mom; a woman who is active, energetic, and readily available to meet the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual needs of her children and spouse (Coontz, 1992; Moy, 2000; Pederson, 2016). In like manner, rigid belief systems within many religious and cultural communities maintain that motherhood is a divine calling; a life calling guided by sacred norms, ideals, and life-pathways that permeate individual beliefs, family relationships, and communal norms and expectations (Bornstein, et. al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2021).

Embedded within social constructs, motherhood involves a balancing of personal and familial priorities with the myriad tasks and responsibilities that require significant time, energy, and emotional resources that are often exacerbated by the implied pressure to pursue the picture perfect, mommy ideology. Subscribed to, or not, many women experience a burden to adhere to strict social expectations and prescribed group beliefs in

an effort to find their place and to navigate their own beliefs, values, and expectations for their motherhood role (Balkaya-ince et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2016; Praherso et al., 2017). Child-centric and socially prescribed, the mommy myth suggests that motherhood is to be a priority, akin to a personal religion, that relegates all personal and professional pursuits to the background (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Liss et al., 2013; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Exacting a heavy toll, the new momism ideology places unrealistic pressures on mothers, requiring self-sacrifice and hyper-vigilance for her children's social, emotional, and intellectual well-being (Bronstein & Steiner, 2015; Lamar et al., 2019; Rizzo et al., 2013).

### ***Intense Mothering***

Beyond travel, time, and tuition, the cost of motherhood may be far more than the expenditure of resources spent on social playdates, academic success, and sports practices. Authored by societal pressures to be ever-present, on-call, and all-knowing, the good mom narrative often imposes high standards and harsh criticism that leads to an incongruence of lived experience, self-perception, and social expectations (Adams, 2015; Bronstein & Steiner, 2015; Lamar et al., 2019; Rizzo et al., 2013). Not only defined by the all-consuming expectation that she shoulder the management and completion of numerous household tasks and responsibilities, micro and macro-narratives of the ideal mother include a pervasive ideology that a mother's real success is measured by the accomplishments of her children (Bronstein & Steiner, 2015; Lamar et al., 2019; Liss et al., 2013).

An all-consuming responsibility, chasing a hegemonic mommy ideal often involves a sacrifice of the pursuit and the pleasure of striving for personal and professional goals and aspirations, where intrinsic hopes and desires are exchanged for extrinsic duties and priorities (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Ashton-James et al., 2013; Lamar et al., 2019; Rizzo et al., 2013). Deeply rooted in child-centrism, intensive parenting milieu lauds child rearing as a woman's greatest priority; a role that is purpose-fulfilling and for which women are inherently better suited for the nurture, care, and support of a child's best outcomes (Henderson et al., 2016; Rizzo et al., 2013). In addition to the stressors and pressures of intensive parenting, the paradox of motherhood may be the oft-felt discrepancy mom experiences between the fulfillment and joy of her socially narrated ought-self and the pervasive role overload of her socially defined actual experience (Adams, 2015; Henderson et al., 2016; Lamar et al., 2019; Rizzo et al., 2013; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

### ***Maternal Identity Discrepancy***

Driven by far more than the birth event, maternal identity is a lifetime iterative process that is impacted by social narratives and experienced through the many cycles of celebrations and challenges of both child and family (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Ridley, 2015). Informed by person-context experiences, maternal identity is an ever-evolving sense of self held within societal norms, where situation, time, context, and meaning drive the perception of self as a mother (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Ciciolla et al., 2014; Meca et al., 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). As a representation of beliefs, attitudes, and appraisals of self within the caregiving and parenting roles, maternal identity may

become fragmented if felt-discrepancy between actual-self and societal-ideals begins to emerge (Adams, 2015; Padoa et al., 2018; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

Coined *maternal thinking*, Ruddick (1989) suggested that relational self-construal begins to dominate the development of maternal identity, where valued others inform her sense of self-efficacy and mandate the decisions, attitudes, and priorities she attends to (Liss et al., 2013; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Striving incessantly, a discrepant sense of self may emerge as socially construed ideologies surrounding the duties, obligations, and emotions of a maternal ought-self diverge from a mother's perceived experience of actual-self (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Henderson et al., 2016; Liss et al., 2013). Positive affect for maternal identity and well-being involves a consistency of self across multiple domains and social groups, where relational self and personal authenticity maintain a high degree of overlap (Alexandar & Higgins, 1993; Hardin & Larsen, 2014; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). In contrast, when maternal self-concept involves negative appraisals or inconsistency of self across domains and societal norms, ought/ideal discrepancies may result in decreased self-efficacy and myriad emotions including tension, shame, and a desire to hide undesirable aspects of oneself (Adams, 2015; Hardin & Larsen, 2014; Liss et al., 2013; Padoa et al., 2018).

### **Maternal Perfection**

Often perpetuated by family, friends, community, and media, motherhood entails a complex integration of images and dialog that paints an illusion of the ideal mother; an illusion of perfection that forges a discrepancy gap between standards of ought and mothers identity exploration of her own ideal (Adams, 2015; Liss et al., 2013; Takseva,

2019; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Framed within a socio-cultural narrative fueled by public discourse, social media, and entertainment, today's dominant mommy ideal offers a benchmark for motherhood that may breed social comparisons and foster a pressure to be (or appear) perfect (Henderson et al., 2016; Padoa et al., 2018; Piotrowski, 2020). Unable to separate actual self from the dominant ideal, social convoys surrounding intensive mothering may lead to a decreased sense of self, a loss of confidence, and an internalized narrative of not 'good enough' that shapes the way mothers see, perceive, and live in the world (Liss et al., 2013; Takseva, 2019; Tasker & Delvoye, 2015).

Difficult to disentangle and held within the prescribed dictates of historical, social, cultural, and religious ideologies, today's momism is an institutional creation with high stakes, standards, and expectations (Henderson et al., 2016; O'Reily, 2019; Takseva, 2019). Often caught by the ubiquitous mommy mystique, the cultural mandate of a perfect mom influences many mothers' lived experience, regardless of a personal subscription to the new momism ideals (Henderson et al., 2016; Newman & Henderson, 2014). Societal ideals of motherhood and perfectionistic parenting have a significant influence on a woman's perception of self, her maternal role, and the narrative she carries across the lifespan (Henderson et al., 2016; O'Reilly, 2019).

Measured against an unattainable ideal authored by cultural, social, and historical discourses, mothers' sense of self-worth, efficacy, and role satisfaction may be plagued with doubt, fear, and uncertainty (Henderson et al., 2016; Padoa et al., 2018). Planted deep in the soil of self-discrepancy and perceived lack, the seed of maternal identity may sprout into chronic rumination, negative automatic thoughts, and a preoccupation with

meeting the standards of perfection (Flett et al., 2012; Nepon et al., 2016). Considered to be multidimensional, perfectionism is a construct of trait characteristics with personal, interpersonal, cognitive, emotional, and self-presentational components. (Chen et al., 2017; Nepon et al., 2016).

### **Socially Prescribed Perfectionism**

Considered a form of overcompensation for felt-discrepancy, evaluative concerns and perfectionistic traits are often driven by macro-level discourses and an individuals' need to navigate chronic feelings of self-doubt, ruminative cognitions, fear of failure, and exposure to negative peer evaluations (Flett et al., 2012; Nepon et al., 2016; Piotrowski, 2020). Defined by the perfectionistic traits of high striving, flawlessness, self-criticism, and a fear of negative appraisals, socially prescribed perfectionism is bred by the perception that valued others demand flawless perfection and that anything less than ideal will be met with negative appraisals, harsh criticism, or social rejection (Flett et al., 2012; Piotrowski, 2020; Smith et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017). Often difficult to evade, dominant ideologies of the mommy ideal and intense mothering often perpetuate the pressure to be perfect and fuel maladaptive socio-emotional automatic thoughts of maternal guilt, shame, and felt discrepancy (Flett et al., 2012; Henderson et al., 2016).

### **The Price of Perfect**

Beginning before birth and extending beyond diploma, motherhood could be considered a role that has no official date for its beginning or its end. Engrained early, and pervasive in media and social messaging, intense mothering norms often result in a pressure to be perfect and a fear of negative evaluations that has the potential to lead to a

role overload and an identity deficit as the mother attempts to juggle, carry, and shoulder the demands and expectations of an impossibly idealized life (Henderson et al., 2016; Lamar et al., 2019; Padoa et al., 2018; Swenson & Zvonkovic, 2016). Beyond good enough, images of an ideal mother threaten maternal well-being, offering a ubiquitous pressure that for more than 6,570 consecutive days a woman is selfless, professional, all-knowing, compassionate, and organized within a standard akin, only, to Mother Theresa (Adams, 2015; Henderson et al., 2016; Meca et al., 2020).

In competition with societal expectations, idealized images of motherhood, and her own desires for self-fulfillment a woman may experience self-definition problems as she begins to mold herself into the role expectations assigned by societal or relational others (Henderson et al., 2016; Liss et al., 2013; van Halen et al., 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Subject to feelings of inadequacy, self-blame, and fear of negative evaluation, the motherhood myth leads to a pressure to be perfect, which can result in identity conflict, self-discrepancy, decreased self-efficacy, and maternal guilt and shame that devalues her efforts and de-prioritizes her own self-care (Henderson et al., 2016; Lamar et al., 2019; Liss et al., 2013). Maladaptive perfectionistic traits can arise from a domain specific, felt discrepancy between the perception of actual self and ought-self across the many transitions and stages of motherhood that may result in chronic self-scrutiny, loneliness, and rumination (Padoa et al., 2018; Steffen, 2014; van Halen et al., 2020).

More so than the role transitions and myriad responsibilities across the life cycle of motherhood, the perceived social expectations of flawless and perfect often lead to a steady decline in maternal well-being, where life satisfaction decreases, anxiety and

depression increases, and socio-emotional cognitions are compromised (Henderson et al., 2016; Padoa et al., 2018; Sheldon et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017). Perhaps intensifying maternal discouragement, hopelessness, and social disconnection, socially narrated mommy ideals suggest that mother is responsible for her children's physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional developmental outcomes, responsibilities with high stakes and heavy burdens (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Smith et al., 2017; Steffen, 2014). Compelled to strive for the ideal, yet chronically aware of felt-discrepancy, individuals high in socially prescribed perfectionism may begin to socially disconnect, believing that belonging is earned only when perfection is attained; a belief that can have detrimental outcomes for social and emotional well-being for the individual and those for whom she cares (Padoa et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017).

### **Social and Relational Disconnection**

Finely twined and fragile, an individual's sense of identity is informed by how the self is experienced and how the self is defined within individual and societal constructs (Hardy et al., 2017). Driven by the expectations of an internalized audience, individuals high in the felt discrepancy between the actual self and ought-self may experience an increase in ruminative brooding, automatic negative thoughts, critical self-appraisal, and heightened stress response that can result in an increased sensitivity to social evaluation (Flett et al., 2012; Moretti & Higgins, 1999). Guided by the direct and indirect standards and expectations of hegemonic momism, today's mother may experience negative effects in which loneliness, overwhelm, and resentment begin to infiltrate familial and social relationships (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Henderson et al., 2016; Meca et al., 2020).

Sensitive to failure, highly self-critical, and afraid of harsh social appraisals, individuals high in trait characteristics of socially prescribed maternal perfectionism are at increased risk of social disconnection, which may hinder help-seeking and lead to a higher risk of depression (Eaton et al., 2016; Lamar et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). Impeding one's sense of authenticity, socially prescribed perfectionistic cognitions may undermine an individual's ability to connect, participate, benefit, and experience trust in family and social relationships (Padoa et al., 2018; Piotrowski, 2020; Smith et al., 2017). Lacking an integral connection to an authentic sense of subjective self and fearing social rejection of the expressive self, the mother high in socially prescribed expectations is at increased risk for internalizing shame, guilt, anxiety, and hopelessness where maladaptive rumination often results in a cycle of hesitation, uncertainty, and self-critical automatic thoughts (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Hardy et al., 2017; Luyckx et al., 2016).

### **Motherhood Throughout the Adolescent Years**

Perpetuated by private and public spheres the mommy myth may lead to negative well-being outcomes as maternal over-striving results in fatigue, maternal burnout, fear of social rejection, and pervasive guilt and shame (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Liss et al., 2013; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016). Exacting a heavy toll on maternal well-being are the feelings of discouragement, fear, uncertainty, and shame that are often associated when parenting includes chronic stress and adverse life experiences that exceed perceived resource and reason (Alexander & Higgins, 1993; Busseri & Merrick, 2016; Piotrowski, 2020; Silberg et al., 2018). Prone to ruminate and, often, negatively affected by the

distress, emotional distance, and relational struggles of their offspring, maternal well-being may be significantly compromised throughout the adolescent child-rearing years (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015, 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

Genevan philosopher and writer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau compared the adolescent years to the roaring waves that precede a wild ocean tempest (1762/2007). Nearly 300 years later, the adolescent years are often considered to be a torrent of emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical challenges wrought with clouds of conflict and stormy relationships at home, at school, and with self (Comstock, 1994; Romero et al., 2014). The identity-seeking adolescent of the 21st century is exposed to life challenges and daily experiences that can result in feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and hopelessness that impact life satisfaction and the ability to make meaning from life's many ups and downs (Disabato et al., 2016; Fabricatore & Handall, 2000). Youth as young as 10 years old may begin the developmental process of balancing the fine line between a desire for connection and autonomy where family goals, roles, values, and beliefs are questioned and rejected (Bester & Marais, 2014; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016).

Adolescent identity-seeking and the journey to autonomy is a culmination of choices, experiences, social influences, and reappraisals of familial beliefs, values, priorities, and ideologies (Bilsker & Marcia, 1991; Comstock, 1994; Marcia, 1966). Critical to the definition of a unique sense of self, the adolescent years are marked by robust personal exploration where the influence of relational others decreases, and social and emotional challenges increase (Cyr et al., 2015; Marin & Shkreli, 2019; Romero et al., 2014). For many adolescents, contention with parents and other relational adults

becomes a source of significant emotional and mental distress, where relationships that once offered support and encouragement become argumentative, inconsistent, and wrought with conflict (Hong et al., 2013; Saewyc et al., 2009; Xu et al., 2017).

Though family conflict has many negative socio-emotional effects, for parent and child, the allostatic load of parental stress among parents of adolescents is more pervasive among mothers than fathers (Benjamin et al., 2019; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Xu et al., 2017). In an era wrought with adolescent negative emotional states, where loneliness, self-harm, anxiety, and depression are rising at rapid rates, it is critical to consider the impact that childhood adversity and maladjustment have on life satisfaction, well-being, and socio-relational outcomes for mothers (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2017). Conversely, as key partners and champions in positive emotional, mental, and social outcomes, mothers play a critical role in building resilience and fostering beliefs and cognitions that act as buffers against negative well-being outcomes for their children (Brousseau et al., 2020; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Kolbuck et al., 2019).

### **Summary**

Socially prescribed constructs of the mommy myth suggest that mothers be, do, and know it all. Perpetuating a sense of inadequacy and comparison, the intense mother narrative is tantamount to a pervasive sense of discrepancy that, often, leads to maternal shame, guilt, and social rejection (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Henderson et al., 2016; Liss et al., 2013). Though empirical study is replete with dialog surrounding maternal identity and the many role negotiations and transitions of motherhood, scant is the dialog about the maternal experience beyond the first 5 years (Nelson et al., 2014; Wills & Petrakis,

2018). In addition, scarce is the empirical lens into the many factors associated with maternal identity and well-being outcomes across the lifespan (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the methodology used to answer the research questions guiding this study.

- How was my experience of self and identity informed by the discrepant identity exploration of my adolescent children?
- What were the social, cultural, and familial narratives that informed my personal sense of self and identity?
- Were there paradigm shifts that fostered adaptive meaning making and/or re-exploration of personal beliefs, behaviors, and my sense of future self?

In addition to introducing the methodology, this chapter explains the process of choosing autoethnography as methodology. Applied to the identity-seeking process, transformational learning theory suggests that conflict and crisis may act as a catalyst for a change in beliefs, values, and intrinsic motivation (Mezirow, 1991; Young, 2013). In like manner, the choosing of my methodological approach required a paradigm shift that transformed this study from what I thought it would be to what it has become. In addition to a definition of terminology, this chapter begins with a brief personal narrative, providing context and background of myself as the researcher and the development of this research design. Following this narrative, I introduce my philosophical stance and the theoretical lens that guides this study. The chapter concludes with a definition of

reflexive autoethnography, and a description of the strategies employed to ensure trustworthiness, accuracy, and adherence to ethical obligations as a researcher.

### **Definition of Terminology**

**Disrupted identity:** an experience of selfhood that may include beliefs incompatibility or an imbalanced sense of actual, ideal, and ought-self, marked by an incomplete reconsideration of self; a discontinuity or deficit between one's perceived sense of past, present, and anticipated future self-guides; often complicated by significant life events or trauma (Adams, 2015; Marin & Shkreli, 2019; van Halen et al., 2020).

**Essence of essence:** the essence of phenomena is contained in the measurable or subjective is-ness of an experience, object, or emotion (Dahlberg, 2006; van Manen, 2016). The essence of an essence is a deeper and richer encounter with meaning, significance, and purpose of the lived experience of a phenomenon (van Manen, 2016).

**Felt discrepancy:** an incongruence or discontinuity between one's perceived sense of actual self and the expectations, demands, and social narratives of one's ought-self (Adams, 2015; van Halen et al., 2020).

**Middle-stage motherhood:** as co-participants in adolescent identity formation, middle-stage motherhood encompasses the years wherein the maternal role includes the care, support, and transition of adolescent children from the middle-school years to young adulthood (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Luyckx et al., 2016).

### **Background and Context**

As my first child approached his teenage years, I questioned my ability to successfully parent through the adolescent years. As a child, and with my mother as my

guide, I had learned the value of working hard, playing often, and sitting with those we love. She had been a teenage mom, so she was young, fun, and full of vibrant energy. As a young adult, I felt blessed by the time, talents, and devotion with which my grandmother possessed. In her, I saw someone who had been devoted to her family and, successfully, maintained time for her personal interests, hobbies, and friendships. She was a lifelong learner and always had time to sit on her porch and chat about nothing in particular and everything important.

Before her passing, my mother had modeled a joyful approach to motherhood with young children. As a new mother, my grandmother had been a source of strength and support, offering me a vision for how I could parent adult children. As my son approached the middle school years, I felt a tremendous void in how I might successfully parent between the ages of 11–24 years. I had stumbled and struggled through my own adolescent years, unsure of who I was and lacking confidence in who I might become. I had been raised in a small community, with one predominant religion that was the nucleus of family life and community belonging. I grew up a non-practicing member of the religion, very aware of how different my home life was from that of my friends. Comparing my home and felt life to that of my friends had offered me the recipe to a happy and healthy family life.

Following the prescribed narrative of my friends, family, and community, I committed myself to a pattern of motherhood that spoke to the best possible outcomes for my children's health, happiness, and well-being. In hindsight, I often wonder if I was following in blind obedience or if I had simply succumbed to the status quo and social

milieu of the time tested and, dialogically proven, illusion of the ideal mother. At 24 years old, before the birth of my second child, I began my 22-year career as a full-time stay-at-home mom. My entire social network was filled with young, stay-at-home moms whose husbands were students and bank accounts were empty. We met for picnics and park dates, comparing notes on naps, runny noses, and the adventures of babies' first steps. Though I harbor no regrets, I felt alone and ungrateful for my secret desires to return to school and pursue a career outside of diaper duty and co-op pre-school.

### **Adolescence**

Comparing the adolescent years to the roar and tempest of wild ocean waves is both poetic and poignant (Rousseau, 1762/2007). These words accurately depict the often tumultuous and uncertain experience for mothers whose adolescent child is embarking on the identity-seeking voyage. When the climate is calm and conditions are optimal, one standing on the shore might enjoy the steady sound of the waves as they flow in and roll away from the shore. In contrast, when the winds are high and the storms rage, standing on the shore can be a frightening and ominous place to be.

Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.

—Anne Lamott, *Almost everything: Notes on hope*

I have taken the role of the lighthouse at various stages of my maternal experience. Standing tall and sure, I have watched from the shore as my identity-seeking adolescent children have explored the sea and charted their unique course. Confident that I had taught them the life skills and habits that could support them as they ventured into

the expanse of their independence. In contrast, there have been many times when I have braved the storms and captained the lifeboat, answering the call to rescue a struggling child and return them safely to shore. Like many mothers, my maternal role has involved a torrent of emotional and relational well-being costs where fear, discouragement, uncertainty, and shame often kept me from seeking help or sharing my overwhelm with friends and family. In addition, compounded by self-doubt and self-blame, the additional time, energy, and financial resources necessary to care for my struggling children often precluded my personal desires and my critical need for self-care. Increasingly taxed time, energy, and financial resources required to care for my struggling children resulted in a chronic state of stress, worry, and fear that marred my friendships and strained my marriage.

### **The Tidal Wave of Distress**

The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.

—Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen table wisdom: Stories that heal*

Initiated by the announcement of my 30-year high school reunion, my Facebook post was intended to be a simple reflection of time passing and life lived. Time felt surreal as I reflected on who I had been and who I had become. Having carefully selected a family photo with eight smiling faces and color-coordinated outfits, I posted the photo with these words:

Today, I may be realizing how long I've been alive and, on this journey called life. I'm realizing how rich my life is because of the people I have met along the way and the people that I have come to call family! I have a son who served a mission, graduated from USU in May, has a great job, and is off and living a real, grown-up life (sneaking in screen activity whenever he wants). I have a daughter who graduated from USU in August and will give the valedictorian speech for her college at May's commencement exercises- she too has a great job and is becoming a young version of something I never even dreamed of being!

I have another daughter who served a mission in Germany, will graduate from BYU in December, and has endured some ups and downs with a resilience and courage that I envy- she too has an amazing job that allows her to speak her second language every day, work with great people and share her passion for positive self-worth in women. My third daughter will graduate from high school this year and has an opportunity to swim in college, who has also overcome some crazy obstacles to become a young woman with faith, love, compassion, and commitment that outweigh anyone I have ever met.

I see just as much potential and greatness in my youngest 2 kids' lives and can't wait to see what their futures hold. We have seen talents blossom, interests explored, and relationships nourished in a home filled with laughter and tears. My wild and crazy, kid filled home is emptying more quickly than I ever thought possible in the diapers and night feeding days of so long ago. As I consider the

Facebook post reminding me that my husband and I graduated from high school 30 years ago, I realize what an amazing 30 years it has been!

With notifications of friends and family congratulating me on my children's successes, adding comments about maternal pride and a mother's gentle influence, I quickly added the following addendum, "Update: this post is more about the 'holy cow' of my morning perspective than about bragging on my kiddos and my life- just want to keep that real".

Less than 30 minutes later, I deleted the post, overwhelmed and ashamed of the felt discrepancy that was coursing through my veins. In its stead, I wrote these words in my journal:

Today, I am realizing just how long I have been alive and on this journey we call life. I'm realizing how rich my life is because of the people I have met along the way and the people that I have come to love like family! I am realizing how strong I am and how brave I have become through our many ups and downs. As I look back, I see that we have been blessed to call five great states home, each one sent challenges and blessings we hold dear. We've celebrated significant financial gains and watched thousands of dollars slip away. We've seen periods of impressive career success and been challenged by the many trials of unemployment. Yes, I can honestly say we can count many ups and downs.

Along with the ups and downs, the faces in this picture represent the beauty and pain of the silent sufferers of a generation plagued by a myriad of distress disorders, often debilitating but almost always unrecognizable to friends

and family. In this one family picture, under the smiles and the pose, are three faces of depression, four souls burdened with anxiety, four innocent children who have faced sexual bullying, and three events of aggressive sexual assault. In this picture you can see three self-esteems burdened by body image disorders and four minds who battle daily their eating disorders. In this picture, you can find a child who questions their gender and one healing from a nervous breakdown. Pictured are the faces of two youth who have been on a suicide watch and another who is the survivor of accidental overdose. In this picture are the faces of religious confidences, doubts, and insecurities; the fear of not being worthy and never being good enough.

Though many things in this picture can be counted, what can't be counted are sleepless nights, tear stained pillows, prayers of desperation, and thoughts of defeat. The story that numbers cannot tell are the stories how 'showing up' for work, school, church, and meeting is sometimes the best that moms can do. The stories where the requisite social smile and small talk was just TOO much. And what can't be counted is the number of sunrises that offered just enough of a ray of light and glimmer of hope to keep us moving for one more day. The cold hard truth is there is not a scale or measurement that could accurately depict the inner struggle as I battle the belief that I could have, SHOULD have prevented all this suffering. Coupled with the should have's is the fear that because I could not prevent it, it is the result of poor parenting on my behalf.

Having held to the expectations of the discourses and narratives written by my family, friends, community, and religious leaders I was ill-prepared for the well-being costs of shame, blame, and guilt, as I sorted through the incongruence of expectations, and my lived reality. Across the lifespan, identity involves a dynamic narrative; a release and revisiting of one's sense of self within the context of socialization, lived experience, and self-exploration (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Ridley, 2015; Stanley & Stanley, 2017). Fragile and fluid, my sense of self was compromised as the weight of my maternal role was burdened by those stories that I could not disclose. The more closeted I felt by my story, the more isolated I felt from my friends, family, and peers.

### **The Essence of Essence**

I had been drawn to phenomenology as a method for researching the lived experience of self-discrepancy early in my doctoral program. With its focus on the experience of living a phenomenon, Husserl's phenomenological approach appeals to the in-between space of the subject-object relationship of self-discrepancy theory (Vagle, 2018). Contrasting a Husserlian focus on the consciousness of lived experience, Heideggerian phenomenology suggests that phenomena are lived outside of oneself in an individual's day-to-day interactions and environment. Bridging the critical space between a Husserlian perspective of one's inner experience and a Heideggerian perspective of relational experience is the in-ness, oneness, and stillness required for a reflective lifeworld research approach (Dahlberg et al., 2008).

With an emphasis on phenomenon, Dahlberg (2006) suggested that the essence of essence is contained as a oneness with, and a being-ness of phenomena. Like a long,

deep breath, taken from throat to navel, one's lived experience with essence and phenomenon is ever-expanding and contracting as layers of meaning and perspective are altered through crises, conflict, and sought resolution (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Sheldon et al., 2018; van Manen, 2016). The essence of an essence suggests that the experience of the essence of a phenomenon cannot be contained or captured by the rule-bound, rigidity of a single moment in time; a snapshot fails to capture the essence of living. Akin to an artist, a reflective lifeworld researcher is one who leans into the research question with a sense of patience, adventure, and vulnerability. Loosening the grip on a planned step-by-step method, a reflective lifeworld researcher is one who observes with curiosity and contemplation; one who must trust that the process of qualitative research is always unfolding as the phenomenon reveals and conceals itself (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Saldana, 2015; Vagle, 2018).

### **A Silenced Phenomenon**

Given the extensive dialog on the rising rates of adolescent identity distress and perfectionism, the current literature on the concept of self and identity within middle-stage motherhood offers mere morsels and crumbs. Sensing the essence of a silenced phenomenon and facing an unyielding dilemma of a paucity of literature, I opted to release the reins on a phenomenological approach. Applying in its stead the flexibility, and curiosity afforded by the contemplative practice of sitting with my role as subject, object, and narrator of the lived experience of identity for a mother of a distressed identity-seeking adolescent child. An essence of the essence began to emerge as I leaned into, and got curious about, my own voice and vulnerabilities. As I pondered my research

question and considered the delimitations for my potential participants, I was forced to contend with the dilemma of shared language between research and popular literature. How to give the essence of domain specific identity, distressed adolescent identity-seeking, and felt discrepancy an elevator pitch was a formidable concern. In addition, choking from shame and guilt, I had to respect that the cognitive and emotional crisis of failing to meet the ideal mother dogma often quieted the voice of maternal experience.

The essence and phenomenon of the lived experience of self and identity for mothers of adolescent children revealed layers upon layers of hegemonic ideologies that bind mother to a strict code of all-consuming role overload and socially prescribed stigma (Bronstein & Steiner, 2015; Lamar et al., 2019; Meca et al., 2020; Tasker & Delvoye, 2015). Silencing the voice of felt self and identity for a mother of an adolescent child whose identity-seeking includes discrepant or distressed experiences are the relentless societal narratives that sing a cacophony of shame, guilt, and blame (Eaton et al., 2016; Lamar et al., 2019). Given the critical role that mothers play in positive and adaptive well-being outcomes for adolescents, this relentless and vociferous narrative calls for a more comprehensive discussion on the concept of self and identity held within the maternal role.

### **The Recipe for Distress**

I have a chocolate chip cookie recipe that is as finicky as it is delicious (see Appendix B). The most delicious cookie I make, this recipe requires an accurate measure of every ingredient that rivals that of the expectations of my middle school home economics teacher. Every extra grain of salt or flake of oatmeal impacts the melt in your

mouth deliciousness of the cookies texture and taste. Tasked to make 500 cookies for a women's event, I detailed the persnickety ingredient chemistry as I shared my cookie recipe with four women who had offered to help. Five women, each having made three batches of cookies from the exact same recipe, arrived at the event with completely different cookies. After a failed attempt at the first batch, one of the women had opted to buy cookies at the local bakery. Two of the women returned with cookies made from a recipe they knew well, both having decided that it was the cookie that mattered not the recipe from which it had been made. The fourth woman, one known for her baking skills, returned frustrated and confused, wanting to know what she had done wrong.

I parallel the experience of identity and motherhood to this cookie recipe. Mounting narratives from social, cultural, and familial ideologies offer the recipe for motherhood that will yield the best possible outcomes for her adolescent child's well-being and success. Measuring one's perceived self against a socially prescribed narrative of expectations and responsibilities, a felt sense of discrepancy may occur when her adolescent child struggles with distressed identity-seeking (Liss et al., 2013; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). When combined with family crisis or conflict, the experience of felt discrepancy may result in a sense of failure that leads a mother to question her relationships, postpone her personal commitments, and engage in ruminative exploration of goals, roles, and beliefs (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Cyr et al., 2015; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

## **Autoethnography**

It was my own ruminative and reflexive exploration that initially enticed me to consider autoethnography as my selected methodology. Autoethnography belongs to a broad family of qualitative research intended to explore the human lived experience of a phenomenon (Saldana, 2015). Using a storied narrative with the intention to view subject and object simultaneously, an autoethnography illustrates the symbiotic relationship of self within social context (Chang, 2016b; Schwandt, 1996). Bridging story and science, an autoethnographic researcher may employ a variety of approaches and artifacts to expand a broader understanding of complex social constructs (Jones et al., 2016). It is through the sharing of story and the science of lived experience that an autoethnographic researcher is privileged to evoke critical social change, giving voice to the marginalized by unlocking doors, opening windows, and disrupting canonical narratives (Ettorre, 2019; Qutoshi, 2015).

As a methodology, autoethnography supports a thick description of lived experience, felt emotion, and cognitive appraisal. With a commitment to curiosity and exploration, the researcher applying autoethnography to the study of the phenomenon is privileged to sit with, stand back, and walk around the lifeworld experience. Through the use of creative narrative, personal artifacts, and intentional reflexivity, an autoethnographic researcher has access to layers of lived experience that are often quieted by dominant discourses and pervasive narratives (Chang, 2016a). The story of lived experience lends to autoethnography the potential to create meaning from one's obstacles

and to transform one's felt relationship with self and identity held within societal and cultural norms (Chang, 2016a; Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Qutoshi, 2015).

The decision to step into autoethnography was a process of challenging myself to wade through the uncertainty and resistance that muddied my confidence. There are creative risks and professional vulnerabilities that must be weighed against the benefits and creative potential of an autoethnographic study. With roots in anthropology and often utilized in sociology inquiries, autoethnography incorporates ethnography, narrative self-inquiry, and hermeneutics to examine identity, power, and privilege within a cultural context (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). From an insider's perspective, autoethnography is purposed to disrupt norms and break the silence in order to maneuver through the pain of social inequities with the intent to create meaningful change (Jones et al., 2016).

### **A Journey of Lived Experience**

Like my journey through motherhood and my journey into autoethnography, the journey to discovering the paradigm shifts emerged cyclical throughout data collections and daily self-reflexivity practices. Using self-discrepancy theory and transformational learning theory as my guideposts, I identified the narratives of significant themes that were found throughout the data.

By considering the role of personal and social narratives in the exploration and re-consideration of identity, I have strived to maintain a constructivist approach to interpreting the felt discrepancy, meaning making, and transformation of my lived experience against the backdrop of my social and cultural norms, narratives, and prescribed expectations (Brousseau et al., 2020; Nolan et al., 2017; Yilmaz, 2019).

Influenced by the early work of constructivist learning theorists, Mezirow (1978) suggests that transformative learning is a living theory. Transformative growth is a process of living, experiencing, and intentional reflecting that continues across the lifespan as individuals attempt to make meaning of lived experience through the vantage point of lessons learned and the lenses of perceived past, present, and assumptive futures (Lewin, 2019; Welch et al., 2020; Young, 2013). Specifically, I considered Robert Kegan's adult meaning making lenses (instrumental, socialized, self-authoring, self-transforming) in identifying the lived experience of my concept of self and identity through the various cycles of distress, meaning, and growth found throughout the data gathered from my journal entries, yoga notes, and voice dictated memos (Lewin et al. 2019).

### **Research Design: Privilege and Pitfalls**

Situated as the researcher and the research instrument lends both privilege and pitfall to an autoethnographic account of lived experience. Inherent to the journey of autoethnography are the many curves, corners, and crevices of maintaining authenticity and rigor while drawing upon the vignettes of one's life (Anderson & Glass-Caffin, 2016). Like many researchers, it was the sense that something was missing in the literature that, originally, drew me to an autoethnographic methodology. As a work of self-reflection and personal narrative, autoethnography can be a vehicle for the re-exploration of lived experience that evokes new layers of self-understanding, meaning making, and personal transformation (Chang, 2016a). In contrast, standing center stage as the subject of the study, presents a unique sense of personal exposure that risks self-doubt

and vulnerability in front of one's peers, mentors, and professional guides (Forber-Pratt, 2015). An honest appraisal of the privileges and the pitfalls was requisite in the design of this research.

### ***The Privileges of Autoethnography***

The storyteller in me was drawn to the flexibility that an autoethnography affords the researcher. From daily hassles to significant moments, it is through the creative telling and re-telling of story that I feel most comfortable as a friend, mother, and teacher. Supporting a storied narrative approach, an autoethnography utilizes a wide range of artifacts and memorabilia to capture the essence of life lived and experiences felt (Chang, 2016a; Douglas & Carless, 2016).

In addition, when engaging in autoethnography, the researcher forms a new relationship with the research and seeks to create a bond with the reader of the research; a bond that calls attention to implications and generates future research (Chang, 2016a). The open-ended nature of autoethnographic research lends itself to the elevation of new understanding, insights gained, or perspectives shifted (Anderson & Glass-Caffin, 2016).

As I considered my own journey into the choosing of autoethnography, I appreciated that my experience has been shared by many who have paved the way before me. When embarking on the journey into autoethnography, the researcher is likely to begin with what is missing. In addition, both researcher and reader must be open to the newness of the raw and the vulnerable aspects of this methodology, willing to navigate the responses and questions of others (Douglas & Careless, 2016).

The creative license afforded autoethnography combined with a willingness and desire to challenge myself as a student and as a researcher, supported my consideration of autoethnography. It was the fact that I had felt it, lived it, and discussed it with students and workshop participants that led me to trust that I needed to talk about the silenced and puzzled aspects of middle-stage motherhood and embark on the journey into the pitfalls of the unknown and uncertain.

### ***The Pitfalls of Autoethnography***

At the heart of autoethnography is the union of creative writing and empirical dialog. The researcher of autoethnography draws upon a wide range of diaries, poetry, song, dance, and artistic creations to share and reveal the silenced, hidden, and stigmatized aspects of the living experience of the essence of a phenomenon (Chang, 2016a; Ettore, 2017). It is the delicate and intricate weaving of the personal and the scientific that lends itself to overstatement. Navigating the responses of others has been one of the most vulnerable and intimidating aspects of choosing autoethnography as a doctoral candidate (Douglas & Carless, 2016; Forber-Pratt, 2015; O'Hara, 2018).

Choosing autoethnography can involve a trepidation from those who are new to this methodology. In acknowledging a unique burden of care and caution that is often required of the researcher who opts for autoethnography as methodology, Chang (2016a) suggests important aspects of research design that must be avoided. The researcher of autoethnography commits to the growing body of empirical research by focusing on the social and cultural context of their lived experience. To support this commitment, the researcher seeks to avoid:

1. The excessive narrative focused entirely on oneself.
2. An overemphasis on narration, an underemphasis on cultural and societal interpretation.
3. Relying, heavily, on memory recall
4. The assumption that self-narration extols ownership of shared stories.

It is with strict adherence to both the privileges and pitfalls of an autoethnography design that any researcher claims access to the rigor and validity of an autoethnography. It is with strict respect to the privileges afforded autoethnography and strict adherence to the risks involved with the pitfalls of autoethnography that I moved forward with this research design.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

In every way a non-linear process, the autoethnography is likely to be traveled more like a scavenger hunt than a charted course (Chang, 2016a). The recalling of stories for autoethnography requires planned flexibility, led with purpose, and open to creative exploration. Always touched, more fully flavored, by the people, places, and experiences of today, the memory of yesterday is rarely twice visited in exactly the same way. Like a good book that requires the reader to turn the page, one reflected moment may lead to the memory of another. As such, data collection and data analysis for this study followed the flow of experience rather than a linear progression through time. Age and time become the illusion of a measured system that pales to the transformation and meaning making of one's identity journey.

Inherent to autoethnography is the flavor of lived experience as voiced through storied moments of impact, transformation, and meaning. Just as adding butterscotch chips to my chocolate chip cookie recipe, adding another's voice to the data collection and analysis would change the flavor of the autoethnography research. In the place of triangulation, data checking, and biases, I maintained credibility through the rigor of theoretical triangulation and multiparadigmatic narrative afforded autoethnography.

Data were selected by date and content, gathered from a variety of personal artifacts that include journal entries, voice recorded thoughts, doodles, and meeting notes. Data collection was purposeful as it relates to these qualifying markers:

- Dates of interest, 2015–2021
- Lived experience of self-concept and felt identity
- Perceived social, cultural, familial narratives
- Paradigm shifts
- Felt discrepancy
- Beliefs appraisal
- Meaning making

### ***Personal Considerations***

Autoethnography lives and breathes through the personal experiences that stow away in the recollection of the past but seen with the perspective of the present (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). As a transformational tool, autoethnography fosters a meaning-making process whereby the vignettes of yesterday are cradled in the light of today and given significance for tomorrow (Jones et al., 2016; O'Hara, 2018; Hughes &

Pennington, 2017). Often the result of a disorienting event, personal transformation, and paradigm shifts have the potential to include lost relationships, struggled experiences, and wounds unhealed (Jones et al., 2016; Welch et al., 2020; Young, 2013). To support self-care and positive well-being, I incorporated a daily morning routine that includes journal writing, meditation, and body movement. In addition, I regularly scheduled care-check meetings with help-professionals, friends, and mentors including, but not limited to:

- Weekly virtual meeting with a friend and peer reporting on emotional scale, self-care check in, and self-care commitment for the following week
- Weekly virtual meeting with dissertation advisor
- Weekly, 50-minute therapy session with a psychologist
- Weekly, 50-minute energy healer session, moving stress and energy out of my body
- Weekly, 45-minute training session with a fitness trainer whose purpose was to hold me accountable to nutrition, fitness, and sleep (I confess, that this was an area where I faltered often)
- Attempted and sporadic therapy sessions with marriage therapist
- Monthly meetings with life coach; her purpose was to guide my goals and help me stay present with progress
- Trauma-responsive therapist on-call: I engaged a family therapist who could be available to support family members in the case of trauma urgencies
- On-call mindset coach to support mindset reframing, hypnotherapy, and guided mediation as needed.

I have been mindful that, when engaged in a study of the past, one must diligently safeguard the lived experience of the present moment. Autoethnography requires a unique challenge to consider the ethics of self and storied other. Though I have carefully protected myself as researcher and as research, I am conscious that vigilance is required to care for the emotional, mental, and physical well-being of myself, my family, and those with whom I serve on a daily basis.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Having spoken to the felt vulnerabilities of an autoethnographic study and addressed personal considerations for myself as researcher and subject, it is imperative that I address the ethical considerations of those individuals who are co-actors in the scenes and dialogs that I share. I confess, this has been the heaviest of burdens in choosing this research topic and in choosing autoethnography as my methodology. In truth, this has been the heaviest of burdens in my maternal role. How, and with whom, can one share the most intimate and raw experiences when the experiences are not your own to share? The lived experience of my self-concept and felt identity is laced with the stories of my children at their messiest and at their most magnificent. Together, we have waded through the thickest of mud and we have climbed the highest of mountains.

To address the ethical considerations of the complex intertwining of stories and lived experiences, I have taken the following research precautions (see Appendix A):

1. When possible, the stories and reflections are first person, told by me, about my perspective of my lifeworld experience.

2. Where applicable, the names of non-familial others have been changed or used with permission.
3. After careful consideration and discussion, my children and I decided that initials would be used as the identification for familial others. The use of pseudonyms felt inauthentic and disempowering for a research study on the lived experience of silenced stories and felt identity.
4. Details, descriptions, or narratives of conversations with my children are included only with permission and after approval from the individual with whom the life experience is shared.
5. To monitor the bias of narratives, my emotional state was carefully monitored before and after I worked on the data.
6. I practiced process consent (Sikes, 2010; Tolich, 2010). Once data were gathered, analyzed, coded, and documented, the written experience are shared with any co-actors in that vignette. Editing privileges were given to family members whose privacy request requires a re-telling of their story.
7. Future vulnerabilities were considered for family and friends who play as roles in the narrative. Sikes (2010) suggested that autoethnographic data be considered a permanent tattoo on each character told within the studied narrative.

### **Summary**

Under the weight of hegemonic ideologies, and closely twined with her child's well-being, maternal emotional distress increases as feelings of inadequacy and parental failure are exacerbated by societal and cultural narratives that promote a bad-parent

stigma (Eaton et al., 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Attuning to self is often compromised as a mother juggles social milieu that suggest she be on-call and always present for family schedules, home management, and community involvement (Bronstein & Steiner, 2015; Lamar et al., 2019). Domain specific and spanning decades, the all-consuming and child-centered narrative of motherhood has long term ramifications on a woman's well-being, life satisfaction, and concept of self (Li et al., 2019; O'Reily, 2019; Tasker & Delvoe, 2015). Overwhelmed and plagued with shame, guilt, and self-blame a mother may hide her distress and keep silent her struggle.

As a written narrative of self and culture, autoethnography bridges lived experience and scientific inquiry with intent to give voice to the stories silenced by cultural narratives and hegemonic ideals. As individual as the researcher, an autoethnography research design collects data from the researchers personal experiences with the intention to expand and reveal hidden aspects and meaning associated with cultural narratives (Adams et al., 2017; Chang, 2016a; Chang, 2016b; Ettore, 2017).

As discussed in the preface to this work, the previous three chapters have followed a traditional five-chapter dissertation format. It is here that I take the reader on a path less paved. In Chapters 4 through 10 we venture into the essence of selfhood and identity through the blending of research and journaled accounts of a 6-year period of time when my maternal role included the discrepant identity exploration of my adolescent children. Replacing an analysis of themes, Chapter 11 introduces the paradigm shifts, implications, and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ESSENCE OF STORIES OF MOMENTS

There is something about the complete and total uncertainty of life that causes an anxiety and also causes a release of the pressures you used to feel.

—Taylor Swift, *The Long Pond sessions*

When my babies played in the mud, I used to wash their hands.

When my babies wanted to make music, I let them bang on the pots and pans.

When my babies fell down, I kissed their owie's and tended to their wounds.

When my babies splashed in the pool, I taught them to swim.

When my babies were seeking, I often paused to help them find.

And then, slowly these babies started to grow. They grew physically and they grew mentally and, more often than I realized, I no longer knew what to do.

#### **The Messy Middle**

When my children's lives got messy and dirty and noisy and painful, I found myself questioning the faith foundation that my beliefs were built on. If I had done my part, if I had fulfilled my duties as a mother, the outcomes should have been different, right? For 5 years, I asked this question in the quiet moments of my every day. When no one was home and no one could hear, I let myself cry out in fear that I might do or say something to make the struggles worse. I looked for answers and wanted systems. I felt lost, and I wanted someone to offer me an instruction manual for what to do, what to say, and how to stop us all from drowning, how to help me lead us back home.

The more my children's experiences deviated from our religious standards, the more I struggled with asking them to participate in religious practices. The more my children's beliefs deviated from our religious dogma, the more I struggled to understand how to connect to their doubts and fears. Each significant life event and normative transition that resulted in a maladaptive outcome yielded to an opportunity for me to doubt my motherhood. Stuck in a silent cycle of rumination, extended worry, and self-blame, my own sense of selfhood was distressed as I was catapulted into a middle-stage identity exploration that I had neither anticipated nor been prepared for (Meca et al., 2020; Sheldon et al., 2018).

### **Unexpected and Out of the Blue**

In a snap.

Like a flash of lightning.

Swift as an arrow.

Quick as a bunny.

Like a bat out of hell.

In the blink of an eye.

It came out of nowhere.

Each of these phrases has the ability to conjure an image that mentally illustrates, for the reader of a story or the listener of a tale, that a plot twist is emerging or something imminent is pending.

It is time, suggests the mind, to brace for the unexpected. Something that we might not have visioned possible is lurking on the next page. Something, we begin to

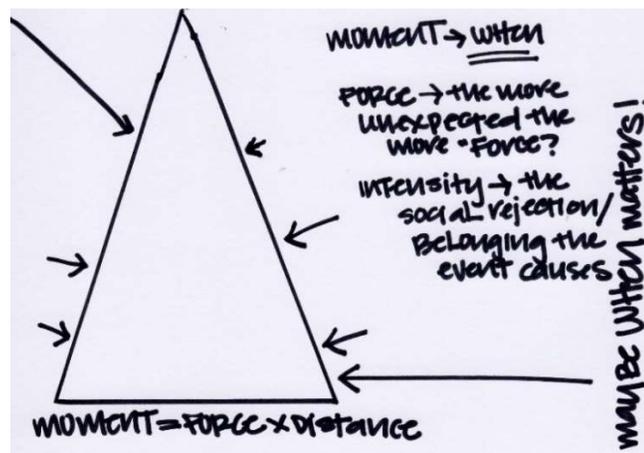
predict, is about to take the storied characters in a new direction, off course, and into uncharted territory.

## Moments of Impact

In the study of mechanical engineering, a moment is a unit of measure that quantifies the affective change initiated by the force and intensity of one object colliding with another. Mechanically speaking, an object in rotational motion is considered in equilibrium only when the sum of all moments is zero. Applying this theory to the experience of identity suggests that one's felt sense of cohesion and concept of self will remain in equilibriums so long as the sum of all extrinsic forces remain at zero (see Figure 1). When the lifeworld experience is impacted by one or more extrinsic forces, an individual's felt sense of self may be disrupted (Welch et al., 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

**Figure 1**

*Doodle of Equation of Moment*

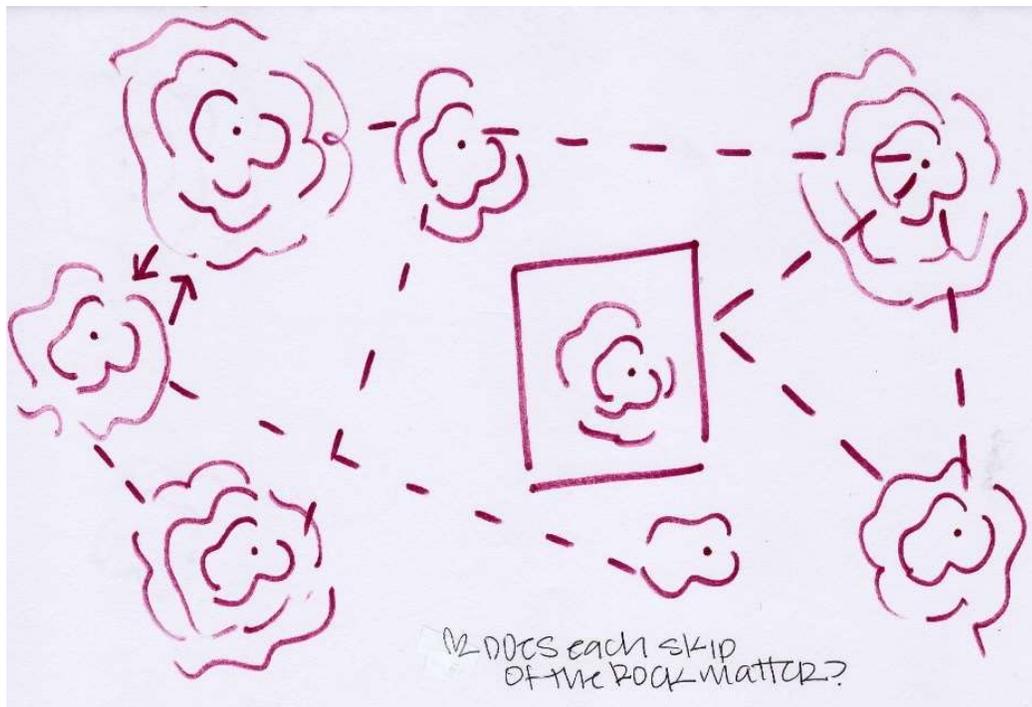


## Ripple Effects

An aeronautic flight pattern that is disturbed by one small degree can result in a final landing spot that is hundreds of miles off course. In the study of psychology and within transformational learning theory, a ripple effect is a colloquial phrase used to signify a propagation of change created by the impact that one moment or event might have on an individual and within social system across the lifespan (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Doodle of Impact Ripples*

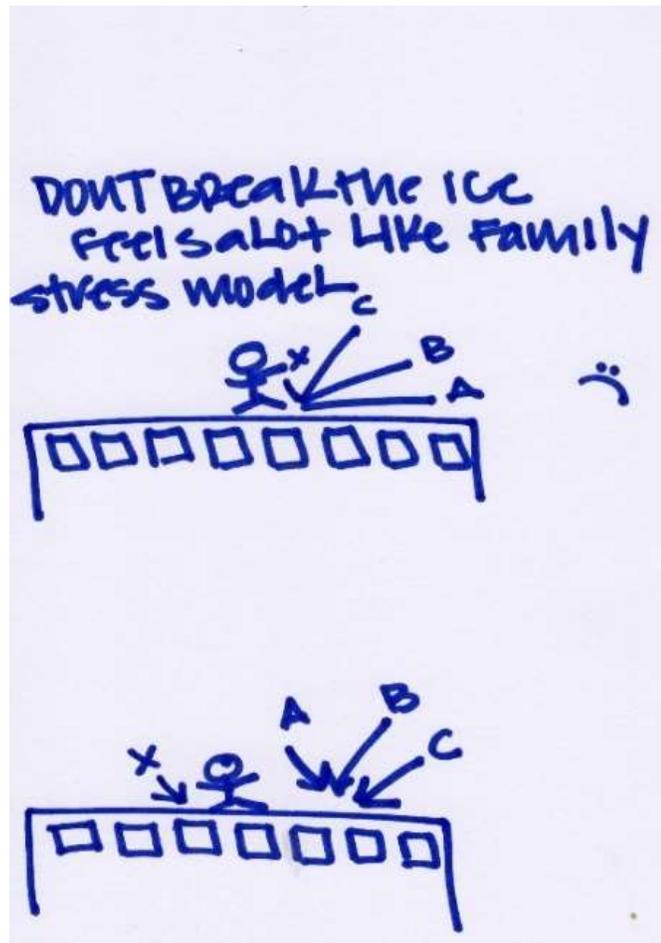


The instigation of family stress, often initiated by significant life events, can be understood when framed using the ABC-X model. This theory, illustrated by the doodle in Figure 3, offers family scientists a heuristic model to better understand the impact of

moments, where the outcome of any one event is dependent on the timing and meaning associated to that event by individuals within the radius of impact (Boss et al., 2017).

**Figure 3**

*Doodle of ABC-X Model*

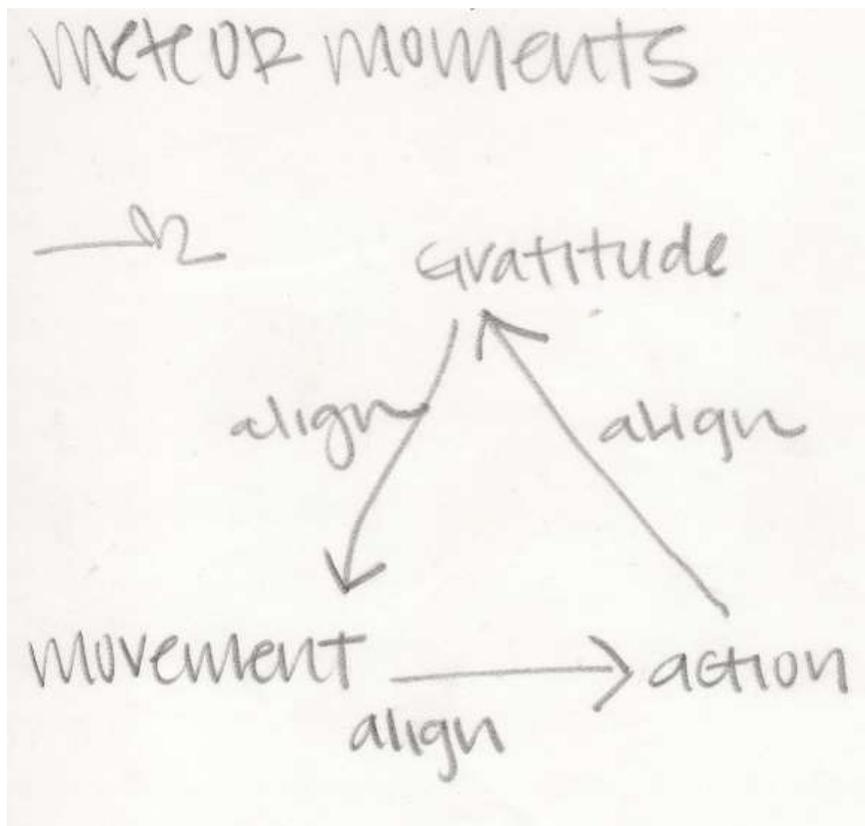


In the study of post-traumatic growth, a traumatic moment is considered a psychologically seismic and likely, unexpected event (Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015). Often significant enough to disrupt one's lifeworld, these seismic events are often considered emotionally and relationally catastrophic; likely to challenge an individual's previously held beliefs, roles, identity, and presumptive worldviews (Romano & Gervais, 2018;

Swart & Apsche, 2014; Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015). As represented in Figure 4, personal growth and well-being can be fragile when challenged beyond an individual's resources, coping skills, and abilities to return to a felt sense of stability (Sheldon et al., 2018).

**Figure 4**

*Doodle of Meteor Moments*



Regardless of the field of study, or the scientific intent, it appears that moments matter, moments are fragile, and that one brief moment of impact can change the trajectory of movement for an individual, a system, and across a lifespan (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Doodle of Merry-go-round*



### On Moments of Impact

These moments of impact, these flashes of high intensity that completely turn our lives upside down, actually end up defining who we are. A moment of impact that has potential for change, has ripple effects far beyond what we can predict.

—Leo, *The Vow*

My lived experience is that every moment of impact leaves an impression, catalyzed by the intensity of the event, the speed at which the event arrives, or the

distance of discrepancy from one's perception of ought-self, felt self, and the assumptive future self. My experience was shaped by a distance of discrepancy that was a construction of the social narratives of my past, the hegemonic milieu of my present, and the inability to align a hope paradigm to my desired future (Balkaya-ince et al., 2020; Piotrowski, 2020; Praherso et al., 2017).

The lived experience of these moments, regardless of brevity, have potential to change an individual's way of being and believing. Ultimately, these moments, regardless of brevity, have the potential to change who an individual will become.

***2021, August 15: Reflexive Journal***

It was the end of 2015. If I close my eyes, I can still smell the cinnamon and clove from the potpourri that was simmering on the stove. I remember sitting in the stillness of the early morning hours, the twinkle of our Christmas trees the only light to penetrate the darkness of a day that had not yet been awakened by the sun's rise. I wanted to label the events of the year a perfect storm. I wanted to file it all away and dream of a better year, a BEST year. I wanted to believe that the events of the year were rare, I wanted to believe that the wounds would heal, and the emotions would subside; I wanted to believe that things would go back to normal.

If I keep my eyes closed, long enough, I can transport myself to the smell of the cinnamon and clove from the potpourri that was simmering on the stove. I was sitting in the fear of the early morning hours, as 2019 was about to give way to the new year. The twinkle of Christmas tree lights still penetrating the darkness

of a day that would mark the first day of 2020. I wanted to believe that this year would be different and that my mommy shame, guilt, stress, and angst would, finally, go away. I wanted to believe that if I sat here long enough, if I prayed hard enough that I could turn back time and stop the events of the past few years. I wanted to believe that I would, one day, be able to make sense of who I was, who I am, and who I might become.

### **New Ways to Be**

For most of my adult life, I have had a habit of beginning each new year, or cycle, with a personal inventory and self-reflection practice. In every way, I am a striver; I am a believer of the value of self-improvement and personal growth. I like to try new things and I love to learn. At the same time, I confess, that I am a big advocate of setting myself up for success. I tend to consider my obstacles before I set a new goal and I am likely to weigh my current burdens before I start something new. I analyze my best possible outcomes and my biggest possible challenges not to stay safe, but to know how I might be best prepared should I fall.

### ***2020, August 15: Journal***

As I have been thinking about trying to create some new goals and new ways of doing things as a family I have the feeling that something new won't emerge until I face the old weight of burdens that were too heavy to carry. Maybe I can't reclaim my energy, joy, personal power until I can look at how I lost it all in the first place. Honestly, my soul knows better. But my heart is raw, wounded, and really too tender. I've thought about it a hundred times over the past several years,

but it might be time to reach out for help; it might be time to change my journaling, meditation, and personal work.

Truth be told, I don't think I would have come to realize this was such an issue until my heart nearly caved in from crippling anxiety 2-3x last week alone. I know I should be so happy that kids are healthy; I should be so content that we are still so close and so pleased with how everything has turned out. But none of this looks like I thought it would.

I keep thinking of digital days camp. Our group did a name it to tame it session, teaching the importance of naming our emotions. Tonight, I am realizing that it has been a long time since I have let myself name my emotions; the pain, the burdens that weigh me down and the pain that my heart feels that I feel lost and confused on a path that I didn't choose and a path I don't know how to traverse.

I feel quite certain that there was a moment of impact that did not get fully healed. It could be the overdose. It could be something even older than that, but I am wondering if I just can't move on because, well, because I have no idea where to start my next steps.

From normative to extreme, the transitions and significant life events that marked my middle-stage motherhood between 2014–2020 altered my life paradigm and concept of self in ways that I am not convinced could have been anticipated or prepared for. As a self-proclaimed fan of rubrics and rules, these life events that were outside of the

prescribed norms resulted in new ways of being that were often difficult for me to navigate and painful to understand.

***2020, September 4: Journal***

I'm not sure what is at the core of my upset this morning, though I do have a pretty good guess. I have an obligation this morning, so I will get into this later.

Ahhh, when does this up and down end?

***2020, August 23: Journal***

We had a conversation a few days ago that resulted in some fears about navigating different beliefs in our family. Maybe the level of explanation and justification that I feel I must offer to those who criticize my decisions is a simple red flag that I have moved into a dysfunctional way of believing myself unworthy and at fault. As I try to move into a new way of being me and being a mom, wife, and friend, how many people will I lose to accusations of blame, shame, and lack of faith? How much of my life do I lose if I can't believe the whole gig anymore?

I know self-kindness will be important, but (how do I practice kindness when I still don't understand the ramifications of changing beliefs). I would love to release this tightly held grip around my neck that I have to prove myself deserving or justify my existence outside of the church norms. This deservedness belief is a flawed premise based on competition and comparison. Believing that only the worthy and righteous get a ticket to Heaven or a right to God's mercy just seems so flawed, so wrong; so NOT aligned to my heart. I just can't buy it anymore, but I can't seem to break free from it either.

These moments, moments of significant impact, not only changed how my family was interacting with one another, these events changed the way we interacted with our personal, individual, and collective lifeworld's. These events defined how we transitioned from who we once were, as a family, to who we are today. These events transformed us, transmuting old beliefs and habits of being into new ways of loving, living, and connecting.

***2017, November 18: Journal***

When I get home, KMP will be ready to start homeschooling classes. No more swim team, no more swim team management, no more booster club president. I realized this morning that this also means no more coaching the swimmers with yoga, no more swim team socials, and (am I so selfish) no more time alone at home. It is a good thing in so many ways, but I didn't quite process how much of my social life has been wrapped up in the kids' activities.

So, again, I find myself wondering who I will be? As the kids change who they are, who will I become?

***2020, June 13: Journal***

I can't get the word 'wisdom' out of my mind this morning.

Parenting with wisdom showed up for me when I talked to the kids yesterday about the possibility that the people in the church who have hurt them may also be people who had deep feelings of hurt and insecurity themselves.

Wisdom showed up for me when I opted to look at the wheelbarrow full of flowers and the garage filled with rocks with the eyes of curiosity instead of frustration.

Leading with wisdom showed up when I pivoted my discussion with KLaP about apartment hunting and moving too quickly. A different position allowed me to offer guided and heartfelt thoughts that made more of an impact than 600 lectures or discussions could have done.

And waiting, with wisdom, gave me the time to listen to what was at the heart of KKP's concerns. Rather than trying to guess or assume, a brief moment of pause granted me access to the wisdom to hear, heart to heart, that she is scared; just plain scared!

Wisdom, maybe, just helps us see from another person's perspective without the burden of proving right or wrong; good, or bad.

From the mundane to the momentous, from who we once were to who we are today, these events are a major part of our story, the story of my family, my children, my clan. Like a new form that is slowly shaped by the cut taken with an artist's chisel, each moment of impact made a gouge into the old that would eventually mold and meld into an artistic rendition of something new.

As I consider each of these moments within my family landscape, I can see the indelible imprint that has been left on our lives as a unit of we. Yet, it has only been in hindsight and after hours of personal reflection, talk therapy, hypnotherapy, and crying

with friends that I have come to appreciate the criticality that each of these events has had on my own identity, the self-concept of the unit of me.

The artwork that has been created is beautiful and raw and something so incredibly different than anything that I had envisioned. It took me some time to get used to this new us; it took me a long time to recognize myself in the landscape of my family. And, honestly, I am still pondering the centrality of my felt self within the social and cultural narrative of the past, present, and potential future version of me.

***2017, November 17: Journal***

We went to California for a few days. I spent the days walking the beach, going to yoga, enjoying quiet time alone, and catching up with old friends. It has been a long time since we lived here; a long time since I felt so much like me. In many ways, it felt like we never left. I was able to catch back up with friends as if we had just had lunch yesterday. And yet, it felt like I was stepping into another lifetime.

***2020, July 14: Journal***

I'm not sure why I am struggling to pray to the same God as I always have. I don't, consciously, believe that he broke up with me, but I've felt a need to know what to call this new Being that I ask to lead me and guide me. This morning, as I struggled to call Him, I thought 'why does He need a name? Does He care what we call Him as much as I've been told He cares? I woke up to the lyrics "I love you just the way God made you." this morning, and I'm wondering, does God love me just the way I am?

The moments of impact, presented here as a long list of bulleted points, are brief snippets of stories that altered my life paradigm and concept of self in such a way that I, often, have failed to recognize myself as a mother. The inability to recognize myself in motherhood, I have found, has had a significant influence on my inability to recognize myself as an individual. All too often, in the uncertainty of who I am, I find myself struggling to figure out who I will become.

### **Ripples and Ruptures**

- Attacked by nude, knife-wielding neighbor
- Sexual harassment
- Car wreck, two cars totaled
  - Resulting lawsuit
- Sexting scandal
- Filed charges for distribution of sexual images of a minor
- Suicide attempt
- Social media harassment “best if you die”
- Rape
  - Resultant probationary action at school
  - Resultant probationary action at church
- Eating disorder suicide watch
- Anxiety hospitalization
- Move to Denmark
- Coming out, questions being gay/queer/bi uncertain

- Sexual assault
- Sexual harassment at school—reported to superintendent
- School/church bullying
- 9 months dark depression
- Distressed transition to college
- Thanksgiving trip, signs of relationship abuse
- Drug use
- Sexual harassment results in homeschooling
- Increased risk-taking behaviors
- Signs of over striving/depression/isolation
- Signs of human trafficking
- Taken out of state
- File human trafficking with FBI
- Returns home, depression
- Suspects emotionally abusive relationship
- Returns home, depressed
- Returns home, signs of emotionally abusive relationship
- Returns home, emotional and mental abusive relationship

***2017, October 28: Journal***

I think it is fair to say that I (have) felt pretty conflicted over how I feel within my home and within my own heart. I love my children, I love my husband, but our ‘ideal’ lives are so different...

So different than what they once were, so different from one another. I can't seem to reconcile who we are, who we have become, and how we will build a future that leaves space for everyone to feel like they belong despite differing beliefs and so many elephants in the room. How do you undo 20+ years of beliefs, primary songs that no longer apply, and family traditions that are laden with a religious undertone that not everyone feels has accepted them as they are?

I think that I have a lot to think about and I, too often, feel overwhelmed by not knowing where to start. Deep sigh and lots of I don't know's happening this week!

Hidden between the bulleted lines and, often, lying huddled in closets and behind closed doors are the deepest stories of pain and fear, rejection, and loss.

***2019, January: Voice Dictation***

The entire decade has been a journey of tripping, falling, and stubbing my emotional toes. Instead of footsteps and obstacles, it has been a face to face, heart to heart battlefield of old beliefs, worn out patterns, and ways of being that are calling for change. I have had to stare down some hard-core ego and I have had to face my own vulnerability that I am either really wrong, an evil rebel, or I have been so unbelievably naïve.

As I think about the kids, their struggles, and their decisions, I just cannot stop thinking that the biggest sources of pain point straight to the concept of pathways as a pillar of hope. The thing that we don't talk about; the thing that we don't plan for, and we don't prepare for is that agency is only free if people get to

choose their paths. If we only talk about the ideal way to get to the ideal destination, then how do we teach our someone to stand back up when they fall?

If the only thing we talk about is the ideal and the only option we offer is a one-way highway, then how can we support the person who gets “off” the path? If the only message that we offer are messages illustrated with images of flawless, songs of ideal, and dialog based on the parable of the perfect then how do we prepare for the messes.

And yet, none of those stories are mine to share. Each moment of impact has an intimate and sacred story that belongs to another, a child that I have sat with, cried with, worried over, and feared for. My story, my impact moments, have come from my role as the mother of six children, each of whom experienced an identity-seeking stage that included felt-discrepancy, perfectionism, and rigid religious belief systems.

In its very essence, this is a narrative of moments, moments of impact that changed my ways of being and believing. These moments, it turns out, have changed the dynamics and the trajectory of my becoming.

### ***2021, July: Reflection***

As I look back on this journal entry from 2019, October 17, my hindsight vision is calling attention to the fact that as I was demanding my bootstraps be pulled up and I get to work on looking for more gratitude and less complaining, I was woefully ignoring the pace of the week and the humanity of the exhaustion that I was experiencing. Maybe, just maybe, what I needed was a nap. In this one week, I had 3 doctoral assignments due. I had walked my daughters’ three dogs 25

miles, took the girls for nails, painted a room, navigated painters for the whole house, and rearranged 2 bedrooms in our home to accommodate a child who moved back home unexpectedly. In this same week, I had taught 12 yoga classes and submitted a proposal for a conference workshop.

***2019, October 17: Journal***

I am switching to a straight up gratitude journal for a while. I keep feeling like such a complainer in these pages, it's time to switch my energy, pull my bootstraps up, and put my big girl pants on!

- ♥ I'm grateful that Jacob kept our grants proposal moving forward
- ♥ Grateful for cooler weather making for beautiful walks
- ♥ Grateful for Nicole's smiling hello
- ♥ Time with KLaP to do nails
- ♥ The ease in finding a painter
- ♥ Stats assignment on time
- ♥ Quant assignment in on time
- ♥ The decision to simplify

As I see more transitions unfolding, I cannot imagine myself having held so firmly to old beliefs and the old ways of being and believing as an individual, as a mother, and as a family. I still question my motherhood, quite frequently. Unfortunately, I wonder if that ever goes away. On good days, I can admit that I have confidence that things work out and that I find my way. On bad days, I wonder if I will ever overcome the feelings of failure that haunt my late nights and private thoughts.

*2021, July 3: Journal*

In the end, I really don't know what tomorrow holds. I don't know what lies ahead and I don't know what this family will look like.

Good or Bad, Hard to say; truly one of the best parables of all time. I feel like this describes the events of the past decade in our lives. This has been a journey, for sure. And though I don't know what it looks like moving forward, I do know that there were as many good times as there were bad.

I have been so worried about cleaning up the past that I have forgotten to plant seeds for the future. Though nothing looks familiar, and I have no idea what happens moving forward I do know that we have the choice to create something a little more real.

As I think about building some new habits and traditions I keep wondering if grace is misconstrued at church as a miracle that moves us from black to white? But maybe, more than this bridge from right and wrong polarities, can grace be the hand that holds us as we tread into the full potential of using all the colors of the rainbow? As we build something new, do I really have to use only black, white, or grey?

I, often, doubt my decisions and I wrestle with shame like Crocodile Dundee. And there is a lot that I do not yet know what I believe, which feels more vulnerable than I can express in words.

*2021, July 21: Journal*

What I really needed was permission to feel. I could read all of the books about washing my face, five second rules, and braving the wilderness; but without the simple permission to sit in my feelings and acknowledge the pain, I was powerless to name the emotion. And, like every monster that hides in the closet, without a name the emotional monsters are difficult to tame.

There were days that I could not breathe. On those days, I looked for gratitude in long walks, letting nature sing her simple songs.

There were days that I could not stop the tears. On those days I looked for comfort in long walks, letting nature's breeze blow the grief through me.

There were days that thoughts failed me. On those days I looked for stillness in long walks, letting nature show me that nothing is certain, and everything is possible.

And, still, there are days when shame chases me down seeking for ways to remind me of everything that I should have done, to nag at me for the things that I failed to do.

On these days, I still look for gratitude, comfort, and stillness.

But, mostly, on these days I give myself permission to sit in my emotions and let shame simply pass me by.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ESSENCE OF ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

Be courageous and try to write in a way that scares you a little.

—Holley Gerth, *Be courageous and write in a way that scares you a little*

Vulnerable. Raw. Uncertain. Intimidating. These are the descriptive words I used to introduce myself and my dissertation research to a group of doctoral students recently. Autoethnography is all of these, and more. Motherhood is all of these, and more. Identity exploration is all of these, and more. In truth, I suppose, the lived experience of being, believing, and becoming is all of these, and more.

Vulnerable. Raw. Uncertain. Intimidating.

#### **Into the Unknown: Autoethnography**

In the process of choosing to do autoethnography I admittedly, and unconsciously, self-assumed the burden of proving why I was making the choice to step outside of the traditional spectrum of qualitative or quantitative models of research. Regardless of the support offered by those closest to me, I wrestled with a perceived demand for validity and rigor that extended far beyond the boundaries and norms of my college campus and departmental expectations. Deeply entrenched within negative fantasies, I found myself intimidated by my own insecurities and vulnerabilities. As my inner narrative continued to awfulize the reactions of my peers and advisors, I felt an intense need to prove, repeatedly, my rationale for choosing autoethnography. In this

proving, I have garnered a significant amount of study that validates my initial concerns, questions, and assumptions.

There is a critical gap in research-based empirical and popular dialog on the complexities of mid-stage maternal identity. Hiding in the shadows of carpool lines, coffee dates, and complex schedules are the puzzled paradigms and silenced stories of identity disrupted, self-unraveled, and doubts untamed for the mother whose adolescents identity exploration is perceived as distressed or discrepant. Distorted by chronic stress is the tug-of-war between maternal blame, shame, and humiliation; a grief and sorrow that contaminates a mother's sense of felt identity and social belonging (Bettle & Latimer, 2009; Piotrowski, 2020; Zucker et al., 2014).

As a powerful resource for speaking to the unspoken, an autoethnography situates the researcher at many angles, supported in revealing that which lies hidden in plain sight. Through personal narrative and self-reflection, autoethnographic research can dig deep into the heart and soul of the essence of lived experience; cutting through dogma and dominant cultural scripts (Adams et al., 2017). Needless to say, digging deep and baring one's soul in an academic research is uncharted territory. As a result of born of the norms and security of dissertation tradition, I inadvertently stepped onto a road less travelled. To balance the uncertainty, I have surrounded myself with peers, mentors, and advocates who could reliably boost my confidence where it lags, to lift me when I stumble, and to keep me moving forward when I stagnate.

### **Into the Unknown: Middle-Stage Motherhood**

Uncannily similar to the journey of choosing autoethnography has been my journey of selfhood in mid-stage motherhood. Choosing new ways of being, believing, and becoming has proven imperative when I could no longer reconcile my past, present, and desired future selves. Imperative and ambiguously daunting. As a mother of six children, all of whom were forging their own identity exploration, I found my self-concept and identity landing outside of the predominant narrative of our family, culture, and religious community norms.

#### ***2016, July 4: Journal***

My heart has been so heavy burdened tonight, and for the past while, with the choices my children are making and the incredible sadness that I feel that I thought I was trying so hard to do what I was supposed to do, but I came up so short in raising children who could be committed to the Lord.

#### ***2015, June 16: Journal***

There is so very much that I do not understand at this moment in our lives; questions, concerns, dreams that I would love to sort out and make sense of. Though I did not grow up participating in the church, I never considered removing myself from the church. I want to understand how the kids feel, but I don't understand how they feel. KKP mentioned that she had severe anxiety just walking to the (churches) institute building. Somehow, they just don't feel like they fit in, but I can't figure out what I did so wrong, so I don't how to fix it. And I don't have any idea how to change that. If I start tearing back the layers of the

church, I also tear back the layers of our family, our friends, our whole lives. At what point does it stop? At some point, won't I be left with nothing?

***2020, August 10: Journal***

I feel lost and confused, stuck at the fork in the road and forced to choose between a path I didn't prepare for or a path I don't know how to find. How do I course correct back to a path that I am not sure how I got off course?

I also believe that I am very angry that I fell for so many lies about me, my family, and my worth as a person, as a mom, and my worth as an eternal being! Perhaps I do feel betrayed by God and betrayed by all the voices that said I would "feel" His love as long as I was doing all the things. So, I kept buying into the pressure to perfect myself. I am sad and I am so angry that I lost out on so much joy because of so much fear to do and be more; so much that could have been more by my doing less! So much that might be different because none of us would have these masks glued on so damn tight. What I know is that I haven't been able to breathe in years and years and years.

In all the hustle to do what I was supposed to do, I'm not sure I have ever been allowed to just be me, so now that I am trying to create something new, I have no idea who I am. No idea where to even begin!

To quiet the uncertainty and intimidation of my maternal experience, I garnered a significant amount of research and expertise on the study of identity, religiosity, well-being, and perfectionistic traits. With every opportunity to speak, teach, or present at a

conference, I felt an eagerness to find my place in teaching and inspiring hope-led cognitions in homes, schools, and communities.

### **Role Overload**

To contrast the eagerness, I felt with every professional opportunity, I found myself contending with the difficult decision to step away from home and family. All too often, the fear of negative well-being outcomes for my family precluded my courage that I could pursue my personal goals and successfully meet the expectations of my role as a mom, wife, homemaker, community volunteer, and church member.

#### ***2015, July 17: Journal***

I love yoga, I love that yoga philosophy applies to all areas of life. And I love teaching resource management. I just feel like there has to be a way to combine all of these things that I love into something meaningful, something that can make a difference.

This morning, my heart is full of questions about how to make this happen without having a big negative impact on my family. I know that the hubby makes plenty of money, far more than I could make, but it seems like there has to be a way for me to move into something new too.

#### ***2015, November 12: Journal***

I am awake quite early this morning with so much anxiety and tension about the stuff happening at FIT. I love the clients and I love the people, but I think it is time to call it quits.

This makes me a lot sad because, though I have been pondering my situation and taking some things off of my plate, this taps into my fear of failure and my deep seeded fears that I can't really succeed at anything much more than being a mom. And, truth told, I am not too great at that right now! Okay, I know that just sounds dramatic, but blah, blah.

I was hoping that I could find a little peace this morning as I wrote, but that has not been the case. I am hoping to come to some sort of understanding of where, or what, I can do with my life outside of being a mom. I guess I am hoping to find a key to my door!

***2016, March 26: Journal***

Though I am having a difficult time understanding what I am looking for in my own personal and professional goals, I have loved the energy and inertia behind the topics I am studying for my master's degree. I find that my heart would love to continue with this research and do something really valuable with it. What that is, I don't know! And how to do it without a massive shake up at home, I have no idea?

***2017, September 13: Journal***

The polarity of these recent days lies on the spectrum of challenging and blessed. The hubby has been stressed with work stuff and doesn't have a lot of time and energy to help with home and family stuff, so I really don't feel like I can step too far away from family responsibilities. This feels like it is a timeless obstacle that I'm not sure how to overcome.

On the other hand, I had a great conversation with Jay Yoo from Baylor about the upcoming call for publication. There is also a call for conference presentations open at both the local and national chapters of FCS studies. Both of these things I feel like I can do without making too many waves at home. Just small things, I know, but it felt nice to feel like I am not so alone and that sometimes life is beautifully timed.

I realized today that I have a huge mental block in thinking that my family will suffer, or feel challenged, by my seeking opportunities outside of our home. Is it kind of warranted, given everything that has happened over the past few years?

Though I had the support and encouragement of my professors, family, and friends, my own insecurities and vulnerabilities could not be quieted. Despite what I consider, the advantages of my education, well-being training, yoga and mindfulness knowledge, religious foundation, and strong contemplative practice I was blinded by the pressure of perceived expectations. Burdened by negative fantasies and deeply instilled cultural narratives, I was unable to recognize that my concept of self was becoming fragmented, and I was struggling to find my center. Only in hindsight have I recognized that I was unable to identify the acute sense of lost identity, a sense of disrupted self and socially prescribed shame that was hiding in plain sight.

***2017, October 30: Journal***

Though this morning started out so extremely emotional, I am grateful for the small and simple things. I am grateful that I have the ability to be at home to

support the kiddos right now. But I am still struggling with my decision to step back from yoga for a bit. It's strange because I thought it would be best, but I feel constantly pulled towards teaching. I love the students; I love being in the studio and the gyms and I love that I get my workouts in no matter what. Selfishly, I know, but I love just having time away to be me! I know I have a lot of growth still to be who I want to be, but I do feel grateful for the moments of joy.

### **Caregiving Overload**

Even when I could consciously recognize the doubts, fears, and anxieties that circulated in my mind, the momentum of these emotions seemed to be in favor of overwhelm and uncertainty. Attending to the distressed life events of my children's identity exploration, and doing so in privacy, had resulted in an impairment of my own coping strategies that remained masked by role as support and caregiver for my family.

### ***2017, October 17: Journal***

As I drove to yoga this morning, I took some time to ponder my priorities. I am remembering all of the times that I had a clear intention, clear goals rooted in a "what" and a "why." So many times! But over the past six years, I feel that I have lost this as I try to create a version of my life. I guess saying six years isn't fair because I have created a lot in six years. I guess I am just looking for something that feels more like me than us. My priorities and, ultimately, my vision has changed so much over the past few years. Do I try to realign, or do I try to step into something new, even if that disturbs the status quo?

***2020, February 29: Journal***

In the past 7–10 days, I started keeping track of the inner chatter of guilt/shame that creeps into my inner chatter. I am so surprised at how subtle it starts and how quickly it immobilizes my energy. Honestly, it often starts if I sleep in which is driving me CRAZY! How can I possibly feel shame for sleeping in until 6:00 am?? Like, legit, who even calls that sleeping in?

***2020, October 12: Journal***

As I sit here, beginning to spiral, I am both frustrated and grateful! Frustrated because I feel so overwhelmed that I cannot manage this and grateful because I am catching it live time. Literally, I can energetically feel the spiral downward and upwards as I hear my inner chatter argue back and forth.

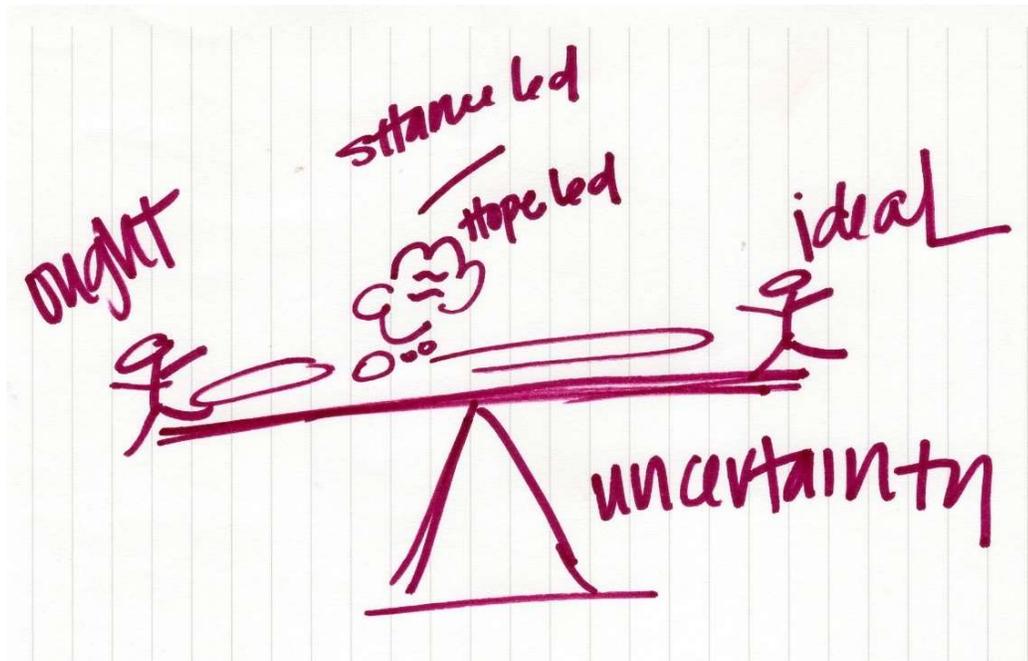
While walking, I had the image of life balance like that of a teeter totter. Perhaps one of the reasons that we can't find balance is because we keep trying to put ALL the things on the teeter totter at once.

All. The. Things.

Every day is a new day to sift and sort and that's the gig. We wake up to a new day to choose. No right or wrong, just choice!

**Figure 6**

*Doodle of Teeter Totter*



As a result of the struggles within my home and my desires to step outside of the hegemonic ideologies and societal traditions, I inadvertently stepped onto an unpaved dirt road laden with the pitfalls of perceived shame, blame, and self-criticism (see Figure 6).

***2016, June: Journal***

I think of all the things that I am truly concerned about is the big question ‘what is my part’ in all that our family is going through? Is my time at FIT taking me away from the needs of my children? Am I too focused on trying to build a career that I am losing sight of what matters most? And where have I gone wrong, so I know how to course correct?

***2017, September 11: Journal***

I have been thinking a lot about how to start a career that doesn't have a big impact on my family. I found myself feeling very vulnerable today that everything that has happened in our family is because God doesn't support my desires to have a career that takes me away from our family.

***2017, November 5: Journal***

I was helping KLaP with her lower back pain last night and found a tattoo on her butt. There was frustration and a lot of defensiveness. It wasn't a shock, but just a big surprise for us both; not the way she thought I would find it I suppose! I just feel like there will be a lot of unlayering over the next few years as new things with the kids just keep coming up! I hope that one day I understand where I went so wrong in raising these kiddos.

They have all struggled with anxiety and depression more than I realized a few years ago. I can justify some of their experiences as self-discovery, but some things I just don't understand. I am so sad. Disappointed. Ashamed. Angry. Frustrated. Confused. I just can't figure out how I went so wrong in parenting these kids.

**Ideal and Unreal**

When my experience of motherhood failed to align with the practices, beliefs, and ideals of the cultural narrative of my lifeworld I leaned into the belief that I had failed. The more stigma that was associated to the life experiences of my children, the more discrepant I felt from the idealized norm. The more discrepant I felt, the less I could

connect to my sense of being and belonging to my community and myself. Heavy laden by the discrepancy, I assumed a felt sense of failure that yielded a perceived pressure to do more and be better.

***2015, September 28: Journal***

We talked about the myth of perfection at church last week. It can be easy to fall prey to the lie that anything but perfect is failure. With a head cold and lots of emotional weight on my shoulders, I put my thoughts into what it truly means to be a faithful mother. I studied and pondered and had a great day on Monday. I worked hard for the swim team, I worked hard for FIT. I worked hard for the kids and tries to accomplish as much as I possibly could as a wife and a homemaker. I felt good that I had prepared myself to sit down and get some personal work done on Tuesday and Wednesday.

But, when I woke up on Tuesday morning, I realized that I don't have to sort through any of the hats that I wear. I simply need to focus more and plan better. My distractions are so wide and varied. Today, with the gift of hindsight, I see that distractions creep in like a thief in the night, making us think we are doing worse than we are.

***2015, September 30: Journal***

I can see why I couldn't seem to get New Year's resolutions to stick this year. It has definitely been a year like no other; the only true growth I could take away from this year is emotional and spiritual- definitely nothing trackable or measurable.

This entry is hindered by life and emotions; I am surprised how hard it has been to keep a journal of daily happenings without the emotion.

As I have been trying to define who I am and who I will become, it will come as no surprise that I have struggled with all the decisions:

- Do I go back to school this semester?
- Do I quit school entirely?
- Do I finish yoga teacher training?
- Do I agree to teach yoga?
- Do I get a job?

This year, with all of its crazy chaos and, what feels like family failure and complete abandonment of everything I thought we'd worked for, has magnified my confusion even more.

I have some big decisions to make, but something has to give- such as managing FIT's resources, growing the FIT program, getting a job to help pay for missions and college, finishing my degree, finishing the 500 HR teacher training, meeting my family history goals, weekly temple attendance, health and exercise, family health, supporting hubby, dealing with crises at home, managing rebellion, navigating more doctors' appointments, my primary calling, family history calling, managing Heritage swim team, organizing the district meets, and keeping track of 6 kids in 6 different schools...

oh my gosh, the list goes on and on!

***2015, November 11: Journal***

Last Wednesday, I was struck by how the weight of this year has seemed to weigh so heavy on my heart and shoulders. I still have some significant concerns about the kids, their religious doubts, and the choices they are making.

I have been thinking a lot about the story of Job losing everything. Job learned a lot, he was humbled, he was faithful, and he defended God. But it was one short verse where he forgave that opens the story to his valuable blessings being restored.

Job had to forgive. I need to forgive!

***2018: May 25: Voice Memo***

I have been thinking a lot about the Texas- Association of Family and Consumer Science conference in Austin. As I shared my story, the story behind my study and research, I heard myself share something that I had not ever confessed in a professional or public setting. In the days that followed KKP's overdose, I found myself asking questions that had no answer. What did I do wrong? What could I have done differently? What could I have changed had I known better? What can I hold onto now?

In this room filled with scholars and academics, I did not expect the question, 'how did you manage the doubt you felt in yourself as a mom?'

My response came from the gut, but I have thought about it often; over and over and over I have wondered, how did I manage the doubt that I felt in

myself as a mom? Not only how did I manage the doubt that I felt in my mothering, but how did I manage the doubt that I felt in myself as an individual?

It was done day by day, sometimes minute by minute. My heartfelt, transparent answer is some days I managed, and many days I did not.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE ESSENCE OF THE VOICE OF IDEAL

In order to avoid uncertainty and to feel as though we belong, we hold to long-held cultural beliefs, following the prescribed paths we've been told will make us happy.

—Nancy Levine, *Worthy: Boost your self-worth to grow your net worth*

The Meyers Briggs assessment classifies my personality as The Assertive Advocate, an introvert, intuitive, feeler, judger (an INFJ).

The Clifton Strengths Finder ranks my top five strengths as learner, connectedness, maximizer, responsibility, and intellection.

I am Type A. My personality color is Red. I am high energy, fast paced, and meticulous; most likely to follow a rule if I think it serves a higher purpose.

My sun is in Virgo; both, my Moon and my Ascending signs are in Scorpio.

I am equally assigned to traits of Enneagram 8 and Enneagram 1.

My human design is Manifesting Generator.

In short, perfectionistic traits, high striving, and overthinking are not just in my DNA; perfectionism and overthinking are my DNA.

### **Being and Becoming**

In addition to my assessed personality traits, I am the firstborn child in my family of origin, the oldest grandchild in my family, both in my biological family and the family of paternal adoption.

To be a good example is the role of my birth order.

My mom celebrated her 17th birthday just 6 weeks after I was born and was divorced from my birth father 1 month after my sister was born.

To be helpful was my big sister duty.

My mom, who had just celebrated her 18th birthday, pushed two daughters in a stroller as she crossed the stage to receive her high school diploma.

To rise above was my mode de operandum.

My mom passed away when I was 11 years old, leaving behind four daughters ages 11, 10, 1, and 4 months.

To show up and help with home and childcare was my responsibility.

And by the time I graduated from high school I had six parental figures, nine sets of grandparents, and four sets of living great-grandparents, all who had come in and out of my life, each one influencing my beliefs about work, worth, and belonging.

### **A Cultural Misfit**

My grandparents, on all sides, were born and bred into a religious belief system deep with a tradition of sacrificing everything for their faith and testimony. The stories I heard around the dinner table, at family reunions, and in Sunday school were steeped in sacrifice, morality codes, and rigidly held belief expectations. To be accepted was expected, to be ordained was revered, and to be deviant from the norm was to risk being rejected, expelled, or cast out. This belief system pointed to a one-way road that led to the promise of family happiness, successful childhood outcomes, and all things positive well-being; a belief system that pointed to the sanctification of the mother role. Responsible

for the care and nurturing of the children, the ideal mother was one who stayed at home and tended to the emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of her family.

My grandmother, from my vantage point, had epitomized this model. All of my friends' mothers fit into this model. My at home life looked nothing like this model.

***2015, July 15: Journal***

There was a long time, in my life, that I felt very unloved, and unlovable by the Savior and by the God that is taught at church and by the standards of a community that wreaks of perfection. I often questioned what kind of a spirit I was in Heaven for some of the challenges of this life. I have been trying to prove that I am worthy to be here for as long as I can remember. I've thought about it often, I don't think that I feel like I am not good enough. I actually think I like me pretty well. It reminds me of the looking-glass self. I feel like I am good enough, but I feel like I have to justify to all of the voices around me that my upbringing didn't leave me flawed or broken. Like somehow I have help other people believe that I am not, not enough. Ahhh, I don't even know-

Needless to say, my upbringing did not meet the standards of the ideal in my community. My upbringing did not match what I saw in the homes of my friends, cousins, and neighbors; it did not follow what I saw in my classrooms, in the media, or in entertainment. And my upbringing did not align with the ideal that was taught by the narratives offered as optimal in textbooks, parenting manuals, and the social and religious environment with which I associated. By the time I took my first family finance course in college, the image of the ideal was firmly imprinted into my mind. The data presented in

my family finance course offered another layer to the rationale that women stay home and care for their children and men move into careers to provide food, clothing, and shelter. Men who are fathers, the many articles we read suggested, are more successful in their careers when women are full-time mothers.

Magazines, at the time, were publishing articles about the economic value of the housewife/full-time mother. Certainly, I thought, if the data supports the value of a stay-at-home mom, than housewifery and mommy-hood are more than a religious ideal.

***2018, September 12: Journal***

I don't know if it is just because of everything we have gone through as a family or if I am just really sensitive to the fact that I do have a sense that I am somehow to blame for everything that the kids have gone through, but when the student in class said that attachment theory always points to mom being unavailable for her children, I had a hard time staying calm and collected.

Ultimately, I know that this student has a different study emphasis than I do, and perhaps in her practice it is always mothers who are to blame, but how can this still be a thing that people think? Really? Every adolescent who struggles with addiction, self-harm ideation, social anxiety, and body dysmorphia, EVERY one of them has a bad, unattached, cold, cruel, absent mother? Every one of them?

Over the past few years, the thought that I am to blame has become a very heavy burden for me to bear. I could not even assign a number to the amount of times I have revisited the past 20+ years of my life looking for where I failed!

Everything from buying ice cream cones at McDonalds to keep the kids awake for their naps to taking their forgotten lunches to school.

Certainly, there has to be a better story to tell ourselves, a better way to find ways to support struggling teens, than blaming mom for all the bad!

Despite many happy memories and joy-filled moments in my youth, I was acutely aware that my upbringing was chaotic and overly stressed. As a young mother, I was determined to follow the straight roads and narrow highways that led to a healthier, happier home environment; the prescribed ideal. I was a card carrying, rule following, walk the paved path follower of the narrative that assigned positive outcomes to the long list of mommy responsibilities; the mommy ought to-dos that would yield access to the golden road of joy, happiness, and family unity. I knew how to sew, quilt, cook, organize, budget, save, and preserve jellies and jams. I volunteered, served, shared, and participated in cooperative preschools. I hosted birthdays, holidays, and celebratory events for family and friends. All too often, however, I felt the pressure that it, that I, was not enough.

***2014, December 7: Journal***

I was thinking about puzzles yesterday. Grandpa could work for days on puzzles over the winter. I didn't have the patience to sit there, but I loved dropping in and out. He was the only person that I know who put sections together before finishing the straight edges of the outline. I loved watching the little vignettes come together.

As I think about what I am supposed to be doing for my children and family, I feel like I understand that the edges (of life) should be church & temple

attendance, family history, spiritual study, and personal study. And I feel like I have those things that I am supposed to do in their proper place. But I still can't make out what the image is completely supposed to be. Because I live in a family of eight very different people and personalities, doesn't each person own their own puzzle box.

I feel like we throw all of these puzzle pieces into one big pile and expect mom to be able to make one big, beautiful scene. And we decide if mom did a good enough job depending on the result of how good she is at putting it all together. Maybe I feel like there are a few puzzle pieces missing? Is this possible?

This was a wonderful mental image as I am trying desperately (not a panicked desperation) to find my own path. Even as I write this I understand why it feels like there are so many puzzle pieces. I know from all of those years working with grandpa that puzzles come together really slowly. And, truthfully, sometimes the more hands on the puzzle, the slower the progress and the bigger the mess.

### **Patterned Perfection**

Nearly 7 years later, I read these words with a new perspective, “and, truthfully, sometimes the more hands on the puzzle, the slower the progress and the bigger the mess.” I can easily conjure an image of 10 sets of little hands tossing the pieces of a puzzle into the air, an image that mentally illustrates the many voices that narrate the expectations, responsibilities, and standards of the ideal mother. From social media to entertainment, in the chapel, and at the gym, the socially prescribed ideal has made its

way into an illusion of motherhood that leaves very little room for a mother to be anything less than superhuman. Whether spoken, implied, or covert, the prescribed ideal has become the standardized norm, the C grade on an exam where only a score of exceeding excellence will suffice.

***2016, July 4: Journal***

Grandma has been on my mind a lot this weekend (she passed away on June 7). Ever since she passed away I have been thinking of her life and her impact on me. Almost everything about her that I have patterned into my own life came by way of watching her live her life. I don't think grandma actually sat down and taught me any specific life lesson, but I learned a lot about life from her.

This morning, as I wrapped the apron strings around my back, I could not help thinking about the aprons that my grandma always wore. She had an apron for every day of the week and was adamant that the best aprons had pockets in the front. She liked patterned fabric more than solids, and she always kept a crocheted handkerchief in her pants pockets. I reflected on the day that we sat on her front porch, and she admitted that she felt like she had failed as a mother. I was astonished that this woman for whom I had so much respect and indebted gratitude felt inadequate in motherhood. If my grandma never felt good enough, what is the likelihood that this sickening feeling of failure will ever go away?

For many women, failure to meet the hegemonic narrative is considered a personal inadequacy that can quickly become a reflexed cognition that impacts mindset, problem solving, decision-making, and metaphysical attitudes (Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

Though there have been many moments of my motherhood experience where my perceived inadequacies reigned rampant, it was my attempts to reject the ideologies that proved to be maddening to my sense of self concept and stifling to my sense of future-self.

***2021, July 21: Reflection***

In her practicum for a quantum healing course, Rachelle reached out for volunteers to help meet her requirements for certification. I was eager and excited, especially after I had hurt my back and was struggling to sit for more than a few minutes. As we were talking about this stagnant feeling that has cast a shadow on my future, she probed a little bit into my past. I laughed because I had just written about all of the different personality tests that I have taken; all the arrows that point to my tendency to think I have to do all the things and do all the things perfectly on first try. We laughed, and then she asked me if it was a fear of failure that kept me feeling stifled.

“No,” I told her, “I’m not really afraid of failure.” This isn’t the first person who has asked me this. The question that always follows is, if I am not afraid of failure, why am I afraid to succeed? And, like so many times before, I avoided the dark secret. The dark reality is that I may be afraid that of the buried emotions that erupt if I actually taste what success feels like in a career, in something outside of family. Does success outside of home automatically open the door to pent-up frustration and resentment for all the years that I spent feeling like I was failing at motherhood? Does success outside of home and family open

the door to the realization that I did not need to spend all of those years feeling like a failure as a person?

Add to my secreted fears the reality that I have no idea how, or what, I am building at this stage of my life as a mother, a wife, or a person. I have often considered that there is no pattern for the family who had a religion-led foundation that dictated everything from role negotiation to marriage venue. If the walls fall and the foundation explodes, where and how does rebuilding begin?

The best way I can explain it to other people is that, through my entire life I have planted seeds of what I thought my future would look like. I planted seeds on family life, school, travel, children, grandchildren, service, and community. For a really long time those seeds took root, sprouted, and grew into really awesome gardens of beauty; gardens that produced an amazing harvest.

And then, once things started falling apart, I was so busy pulling weeds that I was no longer planting seeds. I explained that I feel like I am in a huge open field, soil ripe and ready, but I have no seeds planted; I have no idea which seeds might grow in this type of soil. It all feels so different, so unlike anywhere I have ever been or anywhere I thought I would be. It was easy to plant seeds when someone was giving me the seed packets. It seems to be a lot harder to plant seeds right now.

After a long pause, Rachelle suggested that I sit down and make friends with the great potential of being in the void! She called me on my stuff; called me out to find my own plot twist. So today, I walked slowly, and I sat quietly, and I

pondered on the great in-between moments. I may not have planted seeds for this stage, but I know that I blew an awfully lot of dandelion whispers in my five decades of circling the sun.

Maybe, just maybe, some of those dandelion seeds have taken root and I am here to watch them grow. Some call them weeds, some call them wishes; today, I will trust in simplicity of all that is possible.

***2019, November 29: Journal***

I can't say that I think it is THE hardest thing about watching our family's beliefs systems take such dramatic shifts and into such intense chasms, but I do think that one of the most difficult aspects has been how aware I am of the mommy shame narrative at church. I don't know if I just never heard it before or if I was so locked into the beliefs that I had gotten lost in the storyline. It is really hard to sit there and listen to talks about faithful moms whose children were doing all the right things at all the right times. It seems like it is getting harder to stay and listen.

I keep thinking back on that first semester at school. In each of my three classes someone mentioned mother attachment as the root of today's social ills. I remember sitting in that first class when someone said that she can look at a teenager as they walk into her office and know if mother wounding is the problem.

If we get it at church and we get it in social media and we get it in therapy, where, exactly, can mom's go and not feel like they have failed?

Seeds for the mommy mindset are laid early and continue throughout the lifespan as images of the ideal are portrayed in movies, books, toys, and television. Feeling discrepant from this ideal can begin long before a woman becomes a mother, sprouting deep roots of doubt, fear, and uncertainty before her child takes their first step.

***2021, June 28: Reflection***

I had to call Patti about the situation. I know how I feel, and I know what I believe, but I honestly don't know if this is one of those situations that really doesn't have as clear of a right or wrong answer as I think it should. And I know that in so many things my feelings are tainted by the narrative of righteous and sin; Godly or Evil. All I know is that I am all too familiar with this feeling and I find it more difficult than it should be for me to unravel what is real and what is old programming.

We talked for a few minutes and then she asked a question that cut deep into my soul,

“Treisha, when did you forget how to parent? When did you trade all the positive outcomes of all of your energy and investment in your family for the guilt and shame that you feel for their choices. Their choices, Treisha, not yours!”

***2019, March 24: Journal***

We had been following a script, we had memorized every line, and marked every item on the list; and everyone knows I like a good list. But somewhere along the line, the script didn't work anymore. We were a family who seemed to like to ad lib, maybe even add a little mad lib to the mix just to shake things up. What I

didn't really understand was that no one was following the script to the exact word.

Where my kids felt incredibly judged for tank tops and bikinis, other kids seemed to have no problem wearing the tank tops and bikinis when they weren't with church friends. I have tried so hard to figure it out. Was it how I taught it? Had I tried too hard to overcome my own childhood insecurities about worth and lack? Did I have the wrong manual; had I read the wrong book? The girls all say they did not feel the pressure from me. They have all mentioned talks or lessons or interviews that started their struggles with worthiness.

All I really know is that somewhere along the line, the joy that is supposed to be part of a community has gotten lost in the noise of rigidity, rules, and this perceived permission to offer a judgement of worth. I am struggling to connect with the beliefs that perpetuate this storyline, but I am so afraid of the consequences of pulling back from the system that we built our family on.

Planted deep in the soil of perceived lack and fear of negative social appraisal, the seed can sprout into cognitions that promote self-concealment, self-deprecation, and compromised well-being. Though domain specific, socially prescribed expectations of the ideal mother have lasting impact on cognitive and emotional responses to the lifeworld (Wills, & Petrakis, 2018). Behavior, beliefs, and envisioned becoming may significantly be influenced by the opinions and values of esteemed, relational others.

***2020, May 31: Journal***

I was thinking about Patti's suggestion to consider how heavy the backpack is that I carry. If each complaint, criticism, or expectation equaled a pound, how "heavy" is the sack that I lug around? It's thousands and thousands of pounds worth of judgements that keep me in a state of fear, a state of self-sabotage. I am afraid to step too far away from my family because every step seems to have huge consequences.

I think I am at a point where the fear of what might happen and the guilt for what has happened is heavier than any of the criticisms or complaints. But, I wonder, if all of the fear and guilt keeps me from seeing anything that I might be getting right? I don't know, I am just so tired

This can be increasingly complicated for those whose lifeworld includes a rigid foundation of beliefs and expectations that are guided by those with an ordained authority or when roles and responsibilities have been personally deemed as sanctified for a higher purpose (Mahoney et al., 2021). Often domain specific, these standards become the bar and measurement for an individual's concept of actual self and sense of efficacy in achieving the socially prescribed ought-self (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Meca et al., 2020).

***2021, July 12: Reflection***

I keep thinking that I have unlayered and dismantled all of the old belief systems about who I am; all those old voices that spoke to my intrinsic worth, my parenting, and all of the things that are expected to be good enough. But how do you disengage from thinking that has been such a fundamental part of the

narrative for so long. This belief that the ideal family had no worries, no fears, no struggle is completely illogical to my mind. I can study, I can read, I can do all of the research in the world, and I can 100% know that the ideal is an illusion based on a mirage. It is totally dysfunctional and not at all achievable.

Yet, as I sit here this morning and think of the events of the past few weeks, I still hear the voice of doubt and shame. I hear the age-old question that keeps mom's everywhere playing small because they are playing into fear. At some level, no matter how much I know, I wonder how much of my children's struggles are because, somewhere along the way, I failed.

***2015, June 16: Journal***

So very much has happened in our lives the past 2–3 months that there really is no way to catch up on it all. Beginning with the car wreck on April 1st (a cosmic joke, I've decided) we have had trial and trauma at every turn. Our children are making decisions that aren't making sense to me: tears are being spilled by the gallon in the late-night hours and moving through the day has become quite a challenge.

As I have listened to the kids talk about their doubts about the church and heard them tell stories of not fitting in, I just cannot figure out where I went so wrong. I tried to do what I was supposed to do. I followed the script. I know that things work out, but I just don't get it.

*2015, July 15: Journal*

The past few months have, single handedly, been the most difficult that I have ever lived. I keep wondering how I could have prevented some of this, what I could have done differently or better. Somehow, though I am painfully aware of the ‘lows,’ I am able to see the Lord’s hand, His comfort, and peace.

There have been a lot of challenges, a lot of really hard times. But there were also a lot of beauties and miracles, they have simply gone unnoticed or undocumented. As I consider what I might need to do to move on from the lethargy and displacement that I feel in my life right now, I realize that if I want to feel God’s love, I need to be more committed to my scripture study and prayer time. I might need to step away from a few things, it just might not be my time.

This has been a crazy year; I hope and pray that I can clear up the emotional and mental clutter. No one wants to cuddle a skunk or a porcupine, so I better stop being a little of both of them! More service, less complaining, right?

The image of the socially prescribed ideal can have a long-lasting ripple effect that permeates into the fabric of lived experience, self-concept, family life, and relational world. Subscribed to, or not, myths and expectations of the mother ideal have mandated a maternal perfectionism that is difficult to ignore and impossible to meet (Henderson et al., 2016). When the pervasive mommy ideal meets the stigma of adolescent children experiencing distressed identity exploration, loneliness and felt discrepancy can exacerbate the emotional and mental toll to a mothers sense of self-efficacy if she lacks a sense of authentic connection and unconditional acceptance from significant others

(Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). Additional complexities may arise when stories of struggle are silenced, closeted, and hidden behind closed doors.

***2019, October 14: Journal***

Sister called today and reminded me that the faith of a mustard seed is enough. Maybe, she suggested, I should consider where I have lost faith. Honestly, when I look back on the past 14 months, it's hard to consider that I lost my faith; I saw God's hand in so many of the little details. I can see where things unfolded in a way that I couldn't have orchestrated better; in ways that led to the possible outcomes.

I know it sounds so selfish, but there are days that are just hard. First world problems, I get it, but I lost my yoga room to the dogs, I lost my morning routine to the dogs, I have no routine and I feel like I have to be always present to someone's stuff! And I spend a lot of time hearing stories that are hard to hear. I am glad that I can be here, glad that she isn't doing this alone. I can trust, I can hold on, I can let go and let God; but can't I cry once in a while?

As a child, I quieted my self-doubts about my worth and belonging to the fact that my family did not match the ideal. I find it interesting, in hindsight, that I never considered that my mom was not good enough or that someone in my life had failed to offer up the ideal. As I always thought it was just me, so I learned to obey the script.

As a teenager, I quieted my self-doubts by picking at my flaws, almost as if to prove to myself that I really did not belong. I never considered that my sisters or friends might have similar feelings. I always thought it was just me, so I learned to hustle or hide.

As a young mother, I quieted my insecurities by studying the rules and living by the book. I never considered that my mommy friends, all of the women who I shared playdates and co-op preschool with, were struggling too. I never considered that I could chose my own path. I always thought it was just me, so I learned to play the game and secret the, all too oft felt, shame.

With the ideal imprinted in belief systems and plastered in every aspect of societal narratives, I have found it a monumental feat to avoid noticing where I might be falling short. Regardless of how intentional I am about counting my mommy wins, relishing in the relationships I have with my children, and savoring my personal victories, I find that I must be vigilant in negating my fears, doubts, and uncertainty. The vigilance is a requirement. Like brushing my teeth and eating enough protein, the vigilance is daily.

Shame, I have discovered, is relentless in the footrace of motherhood.

Shame, I know, is relentless in the footrace of self-concept and felt identity.

I might be able to run but, from shame, I cannot hide.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE ESSENCE OF THE VOICE OF SHAME

It was the shame of the shame that had a firm grasp on my heart.

#### **Shame of Shame**

It was the shame of the shame for the things I had not known to do, to say, and to teach.

It was the shame of the shame that I felt for the messages of perfection that I might have instilled.

It was the shame of the shame for the messages of the ideal that I had perpetuated.

It was the shame of the shame for beliefs that were taught in our community and hurt more than I had recognized.

Late at night, and when no one was around, it was the shame of the shame that became my biggest demon. Though I had mindfulness skills and the cognitive reframing tools to navigate through the initial feelings of guilt and shame, my rational thought was often hi-jacked by the looming anxiety over the fear of what others might be thinking about the life experiences of my children. Honestly, my fears had some validity context based on my own lived experience. Not only had I felt the intrinsic sting of discrepancy as a child and as a teenager, but I had also felt the sting of the bad mommy narrative when adolescent development included stigmatized experiences.

***2015, April 19: Journal***

At first, I thought I was angry and then I realized I was feeling really scared. I have tried to walk myself up and down the emotional scale, but all I can do is sit here in shame. The shame of not being available, of not seeing the signs, of not protecting them has been so heavy. I have felt that burden lift and land many times over the past few weeks, especially as I realize that anger and feeling at fault do not bring me to a place of love and compassion. I do feel grateful that I know; I feel grateful that the kids have opened up and let me see some of their pain. I try really hard to rest in believing that this is a good thing. I never would have talked to my dad or my grandma about these things. All I know is that my role is to protect them, and did I?

I had read too many articles and books, heard too many opinion pieces on the critical role that mothers play in their children's prosocial, academic, and emotional wellness. I had sat at too many lunch dates, sports team events, and church discussions where simple chit chat quickly became a verbal land mine of mommy blame that erupted like fireworks when the discussion of adolescent emotional and mental distress was mentioned. And I was painfully aware of how far my family had strayed from the ideal normalized by my social and religious communities.

***2016, July 4: Journal***

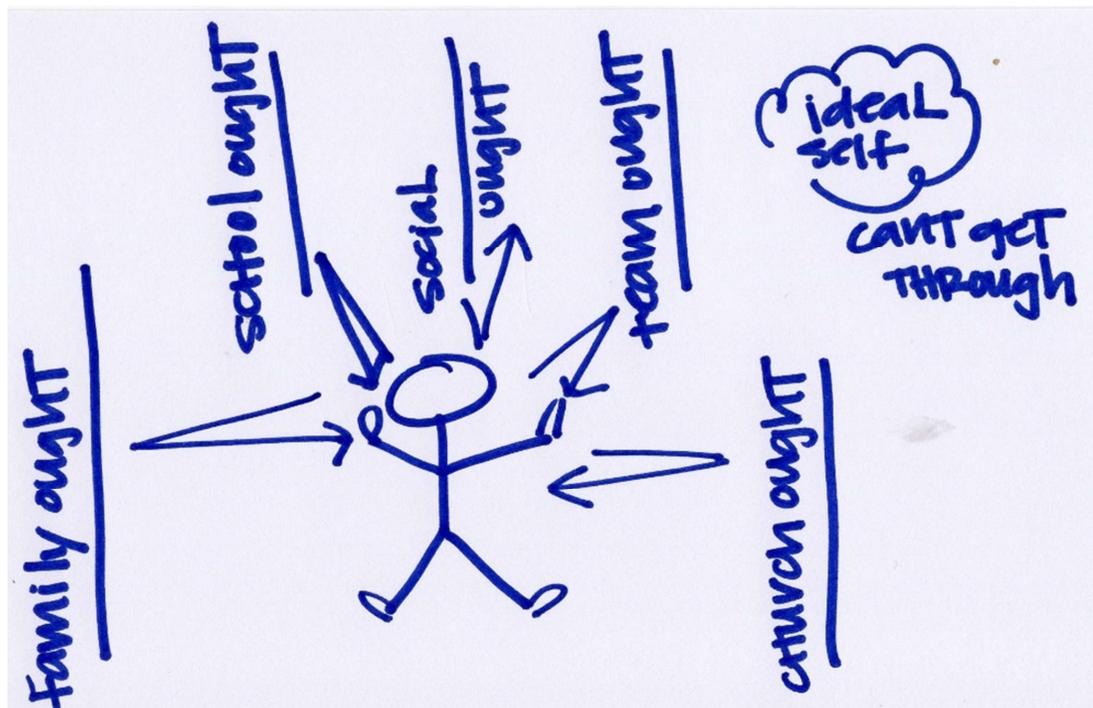
I find myself concerned for the ones who have already chosen to leave the church and for the ones that I know are really struggling. I ponder the boundaries and the distance in our relationships that just naturally come from their life choices, and I

fear that no matter how much I love my children, they will not be able to feel it. Will their fear of my judgement land them in ‘shame’ and ‘guilt’ that keeps them from daring to be 100% authentic with me? How do I hold on to the standards and traditions and still create an environment where they feel seen, heard, and unconditionally welcomed? How do I unpack what they think I am thinking; thoughts, I am likely not thinking at all?

Holy cow, talk about looking glass on steroids! (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Doodle of Looking Glass*



Through it all, the shame that I could not navigate successfully was the shame that I felt for feeling so many feelings. Fueled by self-doubt and fear, the roller coaster of emotion often kept me oscillating between a felt need to do more and a crippling fear that

I had not done enough. Like many mid-stage mothers of an adolescent child whose identity exploration involves discrepant life experiences, I found myself warding off a self-stigma and fear of perceived judgement that resulted in a felt isolation and self-imposed social withdrawal (Eaton et al., 2016; Liss et al., 2013; Meca et al., 2020).

Where there is shame, I discovered, there is rarely an unmasked belonging. My immediate circle could not soothe me, and my religious leaders could not unsay what had been said in Sunday school meetings and across the pulpit for over 30 years. There were no tools that I could find, no friends that I knew, that could guide me through the heavy weight of shame that I felt for feeling angry, sad, frustrated, disappointed, or resentful. And, still quite ashamedly, I admit that I felt them all.

***2015, April 19: Journal***

KLAP was in a car wreck a few weeks ago. The phone call came in while I was teaching yoga. My phone was off, so they had to call multiple times, which made me feel so guilty. The panic at seeing all of the messages gave me such an adrenaline surge that I was a nervous wreck for days. But, after seeing the car, I am grateful she wasn't hurt worse.

A few days later, (we found out about another situation that needed immediate attention and action). A slur of harmful, mean, and aggressive messages went rampant among her friends. Details of things I didn't know but should have been able to see. I have gone the gamut of emotions; from angry, frustrated, angry, confused, angry, guilt, anger. I know I should have, and easily could have seen it if I had been home more and not have taken on so many

classes. As I walked into the police station to file a criminal report, I could not control the fear and emotions that I had been holding down. Could this have been prevented had I not started teaching? Had we stuck to the church's dating policy? Ah, I am just confused, and I don't know what to do.

***2020, June 3: Journal***

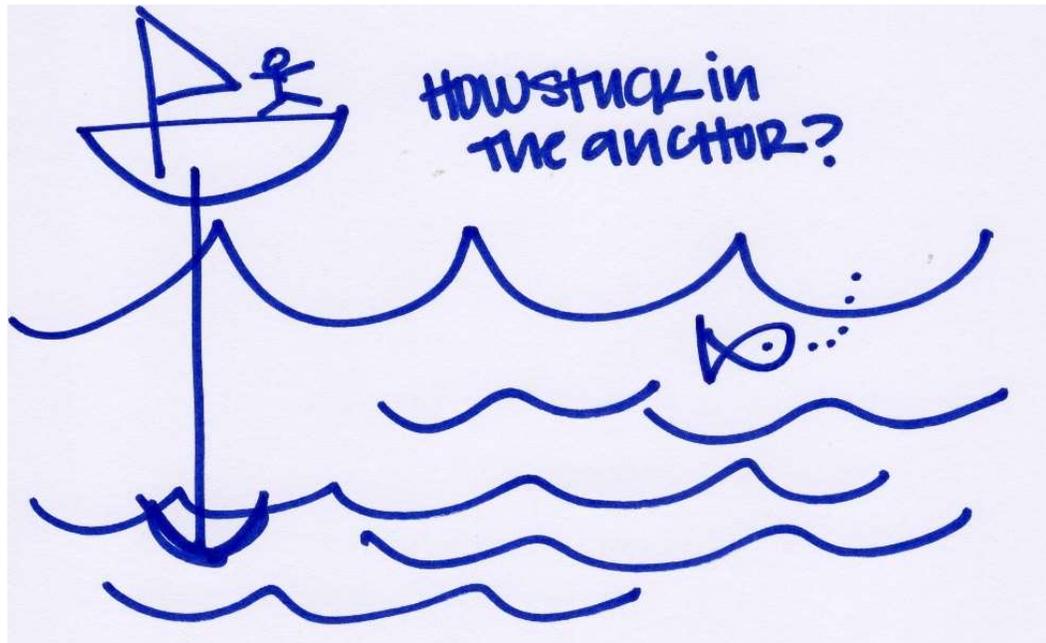
This morning, as I got caught in a little bit of negative self-talk, I could feel another loop coming on. I had to slow myself down, look myself in the mirror, and remember that I might not be where I want to be right now, but I am at the beginning and that is a really good place to be.

Not only am I at the beginning, but I know that the journey is beautiful, so I have no reason to begrudge the journey as I start it. I can give myself credit for the things that we did do yesterday. I can give myself credit for showing up for the kids in ways that I never would have thought to prepare for. And I can know that my destination hasn't been derailed; the journey has just changed. I don't have to worry that I missed my boat. There is no boat to miss. The only thing that I can really miss out on is the beauty of allowing change and transformation to take me and my family into new and uncharted waters of growth, potential, and pure possibility (see Figure 8).

Their path is not my path, and I really wouldn't have it any other way.

**Figure 8**

*Doodle of Anchored Boat*



*2020, October 13: Journal*

I was thinking about learned helplessness being on the opposite side of the hope spectrum. As I processed this thought on my walk, I continued to process the shame/guilt/resentment/fear loop, the more I could see that once I entered the loop I was convinced that I had no power and no choice. These thoughts of no power and no choice tend to keep the loop active in every single aspect and detail of my life (see Figure 9). All of it has resulted in a loss of perceived control that leads to a sense of learned helplessness.

**Figure 9**

*Doodle of the Shame Loop*



It was the unpacking of the secondary shame that often prevented me from truly understanding that I was struggling emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Whether at church, in school, or at a lunch date with friends, I struggled whenever conversation centered around ideological mother narratives. Any narrative, and there were many, that suggested that the root of all of the sadness, sorrow, and sin in our home was the result of something that I had (or had not) done resulted in a rumination free fall that was difficult to stop. Brewing underneath the shame and the self-blame was a rage and resentment that had no resemblance to any other felt emotions that I had experienced (see Figure 10).

**2016, July 4: Journal**

This has been an emotionally and mentally exhausting day. It has been a really long time since I actually felt confident in my roles as wife and mom. And a really long time since I actually settled into something just for me.

I was reading some old entries and found some old lists of concerns and doubts. Some of the lists were written many times. Some of the things I still worry about. And some of the concerns don't exist anymore.

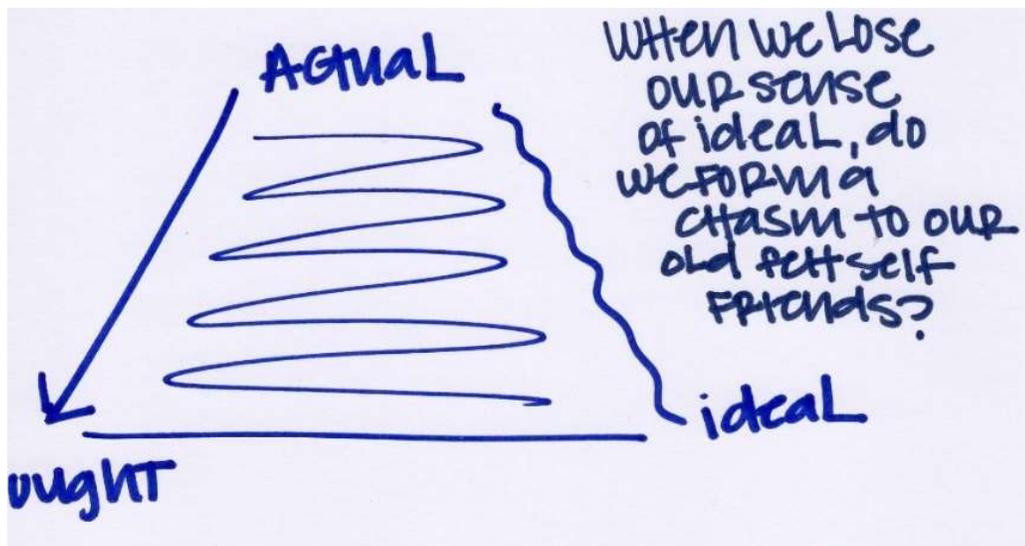
Still, I feel guilty for wanting things to go back to before all of this mess.

I feel angry that, somehow, I didn't do things the way I should have.

After my friend called to tell me about all of the kids going to prom, I know that I also feel a resentful shame that I can't seem to be excited when my friends' kids seem to bounce back and mine, well, mine don't. I fall into the deep and dark trap of comparison and self-criticism (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10**

*Doodle of Discrepancy Chasm*



Now, that is a chasm I don't want to spend long in.

I know, life really can be so fleeting, so this isn't going to be forever. I have to remember that it is so important to be living in the moment; to trust that this time shall pass!

For a long while, I scoured my memories and picked at my parenting looking for any indication of a significant motherhood failure. I can liken my desperate attempt to find a root cause of my children's mental, emotional, and spiritual distress to that of a person who feels critically ill and wants to be given some sort of a diagnosis simply so they can move forward into a semblance of healing. Even now I find myself struggling to concede that I followed the script, I kept the code, and I checked all of the boxes of the prescribed ideal. The realization that a person can do all of the "right" things and (still get so much wrong) still experience negative outcomes challenged my Enneagram 8, Type A, Red, Virgo/Scorpio/Scorpio self in more ways than I could process.

***2017, September 16: Journal***

How many times, in one week, can I write that I am grateful for time to sit outside and read?

I found myself a little envious today as I saw pictures of all of the kids' homecoming dates. I really wish I know how to help KMP with confidence, courage, and outgoing-ness to be involved again. She is a powerhouse in her heart, but I feel so bad that she gets so little social engagement.

For so long, she had tried to tell me that she felt invisible at church, in school, and on the team. It didn't make any sense to me because I can't imagine feeling 100% invisible. Had I not seen it happen this week in so many ways, I am

not sure I could have really understood the extent of what she was talking about. I think I got a little tiger mama when they blanked on her name and then said she didn't know (my daughter) enough to share any stories. KMP had been to every activity for over a year, and they had nothing to say??

I don't know, the chronic loneliness that she feels and the feeling that she is either ghosted or harassed is just another thing that I cannot make sense of. How do I help? What can be done? I mean, follow the social rules, be nice, sit next to a stranger, and just get along, is that so hard to ask!!

***2018, May 25: Voice Recording from Yoga***

I have sat with my daughters words for days. We were recording a podcast episode on the spectrum of colors that lie between black and white. We talk about the grey scale between the two extremes, but grey is the marriage of black and white. The full spectrum of color lies between black and white.

As we were talking about this, I mentioned that I have often struggled to figure out where my black and white thinking may have led to my kiddos feeling like they didn't fit in. In all her wisdom, KLeP said, "Mom, this has nothing to do with you as a parent; but it has everything to do with me deciding what path fits for me."

These words came straight from her mouth, yet I still struggle to process them. But herein lies my biggest challenge from the past few years. If we keep teaching to the ideal, do we really give a narrative of enjoying the journey. If we

only focus on the perfected outcome, can we really ever just be in the art and joy of the becoming?

**2020, June: Journal**

The entire (Family Life Coaching Association) conference was such a success; so much more so than I could have anticipated. It all fell together so beautifully that I feel guilty taking credit for how well it went. But it went SO well. Samantha Moe's presentation on the intense child was so good. I can't stop thinking about how it applies to the trauma-stimulated mind across the lifespan (see Figure 11). She mentioned those pesky mirror neurons; ima thinking Cooley was onto something bigger than he realized all those years ago 😊

**Figure 11**

*Doodle of Fire Brain*



I cannot stop thinking about all of the ways that the fire in the brain has resulted in some really challenging times in my life. It is so funny because I have

spent so many years feeling guilty for teaching yoga; but was it the teaching yoga and going to the gym that was keeping my brain fire at bay? I think of all of the times that I told a yoga class to keep their eyes on their own mats; to avoid comparison and competition of what they think the posture should be, could be, or used to be; rather, I coaxed them to simply enjoy it for what it is.

Can't parenting just be a practice of what is, rather than all of the things we think it should be, could be, or used to be?

The mommy myth permeates deep into the psyche of the culture and community of motherhood. Current social scripts are offering a strict casting call for the role of motherhood. To play the part one must commit to being ever present, engaged, and supportive of family and community. As the script exacts more from the role, stress increases and life satisfaction decreases; self-esteem and self-efficacy waver as one's vision of a felt-future self begins to fade into the illusion of a distant mirage (Ciciolla et al., 2014; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016).

***2019, April 20: Journal***

I had really just wanted to stay home and clean or read, but hubby thought it would be good for me to get out of the house a little and spend some time with friends. So, I told them I would meet them at the restaurant; I lied and said I had errands to run so I couldn't stay long. I put on my favorite jeans, a white t-shirt (surprise), and a pair of comfy flip flops.

I listened, restlessly, as they talked sports banquets, AP tests, busy schedules, and college applications. I felt my chest tighten when one of the gals

mentioned that our job, as moms, was to pave a path that protected our children from making the “wrong” choices in life. I felt my breath catch when one of the moms agreed and added that it was our job to make sure they only saw the “right” life decisions. I think I stopped breathing when they all agreed that it was our job to make sure that our children don’t make any big decisions that might add too much difficulty or change their lives in dramatic ways.

Six months earlier, I had taken a four-day girls’ trip with this same group of women, and I had enjoyed all the small talk. On this day, my heart was aching so bad that I thought it might escape from my chest. I wanted to scream and cry and shout. I wanted to disagree, and I wanted to go back to the time that I could agree and, what I really wanted was to go home and vacuum. I wanted to be in my home and wait for the phone to ring, letting me know that my missing daughter was okay.

In this moment I realized that I no longer fit in to the beliefs that had defined my adult friendships for thirty years. In this moment, I realized, maybe I had never fit in. Though I did not know it at the time, this was the last time I would see any of these women again. Almost certain that I was hyperventilating, I got up from the table and made a flimsy excuse to leave early. As I got up, one of the ladies said, “we haven’t seen you in a while, do you not like us anymore?” Tears came fast as I thought that who I really didn’t like was me.

When the bar of measurement is an actual, or perceived, condition of belonging and treasured affiliation, maternal self-worth is easily compromised, life satisfaction

declines, and hope-led connection to self and other is exchanged for shame (Doe, 2021; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Inundated by hegemonic narratives, the dominant pressure to do more and be better is inescapable, where okay enough mothering equates to the proverbial tale of walking barefoot to school, both ways uphill, in a blizzard, with no coat. Compounding the hegemonic milieu is the pervasive mother-blame narrative that holds mothers accountable for the choices, actions, and outcomes of her children (Henderson et al., 2016).

***2020, August 20: Diarium***

I had to laugh out loud at the irony that KLaP mentioned attachment theory as we walked the dogs yesterday. She had to write a brief synopsis of some of the theories that are applied to family studies and early childhood education. She asked if I had ever heard of attachment theory and, if so, she wanted to know what my thoughts were. It was definitely one of those déjà vu type of moments! As we talked about my own experiences with being in a class where that theory did not do justice to my lived experience, she asked why it is so normal to blame the mom when things go wrong? I am not often without words, but for this question, I had no answer.

The burden of the social belief that mom did something wrong, that somehow she failed, if her kids battle substance addictions, body disorders, and suicide ideation has been so much heavier for me to bear than the addictions, body disorders, and suicide ideation that my children experienced. I battled that monster when I took the kids to the doctor, when I took them to therapy, and

when I let them leave church and school activities. I battled the monster when the kids met with therapists. I battled the monster of mommy blame almost daily when I heard the stories from my kids about how they struggled; about what they, themselves, battled. And the hardest part is that I might go to my grave feeling like I have to defend my belief that I did better than the very best I had.

Brewing underneath the shame and the self-blame was a rage and resentment that had no resemblance to any other emotions that I had experienced. Jealousy reigned when my friends posted pictures of their smiling families. Betrayal gurgled when I tried to pray. Bitterness boiled when I missed a deadline. Tears came easy. And I tip-toed into planning for the future. Just under the surface of keeping things together, I often felt like I might be falling apart.

My marriage was struggling, and I could not fix it.

My friendships were fading away, and I could not fit back in.

My self-care habits were lost, and I could not find them.

My health was compromised, and I could not see it.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE ESSENCE OF UNVOICED STRESS AND SILENT SORROW

The chronic experience of shame short circuits the advanced brain processing, where we can think, analyze, and react; shame cuts through all reason and sends us, sometimes freezes us, in primal fight, flight, freeze mode.

—Brene Brown, *I thought it was just me (but it isn't): Making the journey from "What will people think?" to "I am enough."*

#### **The Silent Self**

There is a fine line between the stories we keep secret and the stories we hold silent.

There is a fine line between the stories we share to connect and the stories we tell to belong.

There is a fine line that weaves between the stories of life lived, and the stories of life felt. A patchwork of stories filled with emotions, experiences, and connection. A patchwork of details, colorful and muted, about love, devotion, disappointment, and shame.

There is a silky fine line, an almost negligible line, between the person who says they are doing okay and the person who is drowning in emotions so large that they cannot be named; emotions that, without a name, are difficult to tame.

***2021, July 30: Reflection***

She called it a void, not an in-between or an upside down, but a void. And she left it at that. She told me to be patient. No, better yet, she whispered, just be.

Be in this moment where you can't go back, and you aren't yet ready to go forward. This is not the time to dream or plan or plant.

This moment has purpose. This moment has great value.

This moment is filled with everything and nothing.

There is magic here, but only for the one who can be still. When the sun rises, and it will, the caravan will pack up and move forward. Some will have chosen East, and some will consider heading West. And you, because you have trusted the Void, you will follow the direction of your heart.

And in the stillness of today's sunrise, I recognized her voice; she, was me.

**Felt Identity**

Defined by an infinite assemblage of expectations, roles, and storylines, identity salience can be fragile when belongingness is threatened or self-coherence is compromised (Di Blas & Cepollaro, 2017; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The depth and essence of identity, as a lived experience, extends far beyond any given moment; beyond any one page in an individual's book of life. An honest and complete inquiry of identity must consider the intricate details of social, emotional, and spiritual context from one's past and perceived future (Zucker et al., 2014).

*2020, October 10: Journal*

The contrast between my heart, mind, and soul experience today has been sharp and brutal; much more than I could manage without tears and a whole lot of swear words. I'm not sure when the therapist told me it was okay to swear that this is what she meant. It has been a really long time, a really long time since I felt like I could just start the day as just a new day without a problem to be solved or a to be plan created.

My morning walk was beautiful. I was up so early that it was still dark, and I was alone on the trails. As I watched the sun rise, I kept thinking that sometimes life expects us to get up in the dark and take several steps into the unknown; trusting, even expecting that beauty and light will come.

I am grateful for these quiet moments. I have been really trying to figure out where I can take accountability for so much that has happened; anything that can help me understand where I am and how I got here. I was thinking that, whether I look back on the past or try to plan for the future, my book of life is no longer written in a language that I understand. Like, somehow, when everything started falling apart, my native language was cursed, and I no longer have access to the study guide.

**Identity Scripts**

There are a lot of life scripts, stories socially narrated of middle-stage motherhood based on the trajectory of healthy development, functional home life, and normative transitions. These were stories that I had grown up believing were the paved paths and

pinnacles of motherhood. These were stories of swim teams and soccer clubs, high school graduation, college acceptance letters, successful careers, weddings, and grandchildren. Though I made no assumption that these were paths paved with gold bricks and diamond dust, I can admit that I carried with me a naivete that the energy, time, and commitment that I dedicated to my role as a mother would yield best possible outcomes.

When I saw some of these pivotal life events derailed or taking alternate routes from the socially prescribed ideal of my religious and social narrative, I sorrowed. The more the life events and alternate routes veered from the expectations of the ideals prescribed by my grandparents, my ancestors, and my social community, I mourned and grieved and felt a deep sense of loss from the seismic shift that was taking place in my family and myself.

*2015, September 30: Journal*

As my birthday came and went, I have struggled with thoughts about how different this year has been than anything that I could have ever planned for. It has been a rough patch with some really rough days. How do you start over when you aren't sure that what you had was strong enough to rebuilt?

Long story abbreviated, there have been some pretty dark days. A few days ago, When I couldn't take the darkness any longer, I went to my bedroom, closed the door, and put my legs up the wall.

With cooling music playing, I collapsed. I cried and I cried, and finally said 'I am confused, I am upset, and I won't make it through another day like this!'

As I laid there, a few things started to make a little more sense. I had been taught that if I got too angry, God couldn't love me. Maybe, when we feel so angry, calling on God's grace gives us peace?

I had been taught that when I feel alone, I am too bitter to feel God's love. Maybe, when I feel so alone, it's that I am being guided to seek solitude so that I can rest in His love.

And, though I had been taught that when challenges permeate our lives it is because sin underlies our actions; maybe God wanted me to know that Love will always win the day.

I don't know where things will land, I have no idea how we got here; but I have to believe that this is not the way this story ends.

***2019, November: Journal***

It is so weird because I don't feel depressed, like I need to call a doctor depressed. I just feel so sad at what feels like was lost. But how can you be sad about something that you never had? How can you feel so sad about a mirage that was really never even there? And, what feels really heavy is the realization that this thing that I am mourning, this life that I feel that is lost is based on a fairy tale that I have been reading for so long that I never really even fact checked that the characters in my story book really wanted the life that had been written for them.

I feel this sadness at losing a life. I feel this void at losing a visioned future. And I feel a huge guilt that I was creating a script for a play that no one

wanted to act in. And I feel a ginormous shame for all the pressure that I put on my kids to play the part.

When distorted by intense emotion or extreme circumstances, significant life events may alter the dual landscape of an individual's life story; where a past, present, and future concept of self can be changed in an instant (Benjamin et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2015).

***2019, December 22: Journal***

I've been trying to decide on my 'one little word' for 2020 and I keep getting stuck on words that seem to be all about moving from the shadows to the light.

This sounds all kinds of depressing to me!

I have this sense that I've been tossed between rapidly spinning merry go rounds for several years and, maybe, all I want to do is jump off the out-of-control spinning, find my focus, and plant some roots!

As life experiences delineate from cultural norms and prescribed social narratives, the burden of perceived negative consequences and felt discrepancy can impede the need for help seeking and shroud one's sense of self in shame and self-blame (Nikfarid et al., 2017; Zucker et al., 2014).

***2020, March 1: Journal***

I have really struggled with whether or not I want to open the can of worms surrounding talk therapy. However, it really is getting hart to not recognize that the past five years have really tested my mental and emotional boundaries. I keep

trying to focus my attention on the positive, but I feel so overwhelmed by all of the mess.

***2019, June 29: Journal***

The stress in my body has mounted this past week and, as I sought to understand “why.” I realized that so much has happened with kids’ stuff that I had not really allowed myself to rest in the gratitude or celebration of this month’s wins! It was a really great month in many ways. I met some amazing people at the FLCA conference and felt really good with my presentation at the AAFCS conference.

There is so much that I do not have control over right now, but I can at least start celebrating what I do have control over: my attitude and my gratitude!

***2016, June 27: Journal***

I feel like my entries all begin like the evil fairy tale; instead of once upon a time, my entries start with “a lot has happened”

I woke up feeling so overwhelmed with exhaustion, fatigue, and a long list of things to do. The nagging feeling that none of my energy or efforts are getting me anywhere. I am a yoga teacher whose life is completely out of balance, though strangely joyful. There is a lot going on, but I am being given the strength day by day to get things done. I am not nearly as frazzled or confused when I am better organized. I feel like I am better able to keep track of everything when I make lists.

I was teaching a yoga class this week about balance. I talked about writing a dump list; a list of stuff that is weighing us down. We carry so much with us,

always, that isn't necessary for our journey. Because our hands are so full of these concerns and burdens, we don't have room to grab hold of what matters most. As we release the clutter, we make room for more peace and greater joy.

That is my challenge for this week to release the clutter and the junk!

Frequent, cumulative, or secreted significant life events have the potential reshape an individual's identity and alter cognitions. These shifts, often imperceptible at first, impede life satisfaction, decrease self-confidence, and instill a lack of felt-belonging that leads to social isolation (Bettle & Latimer, 2009; Zucker et al., 2014). Assigned by self or relational other, the experience of self-blame and vigilant care for others can become a heavy and hidden burden for mothers of adolescence; challenges can be further complicated when adolescent identity development includes adverse or discrepant experiences (Brousseau et al., 2020; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Kolbuck et al., 2019).

***2019, October 1–3: Journal***

I had a nice and fun chat with KLaP tonight about her day and her recovery frustrations. She has a bit of hope that I hope 😊 she will be able to hold onto.

I am noticing how quickly I give up my own routine when the kids are struggling with something. I'm not sure why I do that, but today it felt nice to have the time and energy to sneak a short workout into my day. I may not get as much time as I want for myself, right now, but I can be more grateful that I am here and that they are willing to share their stories.

And, with that sentiment, a few simple reminder-

Slow and steady, right? Eyes forward, keep moving and trust that things work out

First things first and everything works out

***2019, May 12: Journal***

I realized tonight that we have not taken just a couples date in almost two years. We haven't gone out with friends since all the stuff happened a few years ago. I haven't gone out with friends since KMP started homeschooling. And we gave up spring break just in case we needed to be available to get the girls safely home. It's funny how, just like the boiling lobster, we often don't realize that we are in over our heads in boiling water until we no longer can get out.

The experience of guilt can be considered the mental and emotional knowing of wrongdoing, the commission or omission of an intrinsically or extrinsically motivated right or wrong. With, or without, intention, the storied narrative of guilt often occurs in the landscape of action (Busseri & Merrick, 2016). Guilt has been considered an ontological construct of human striving and meaning making (Karlsson & Sjoberg, 2009). Guilt is often tangible, seen, known. Often, the action can be identified, restituted, and relationships with self or other, re-claimed.

My experience with mommy guilt has been deep and, admittedly, sometimes brutal. In my 28 plus years of motherhood, I have had to own up to some serious missteps and claim some unkind and misspoken words.

Though universal, and often interconnected with guilt, the experience of shame has been considered an anthropological construct that occurs in the landscape of

consciousness, where identity and self-concept are exchanged for the opinions and expectations of relational or social other (Alanizi, 2021; Karlsson & Sjoberg, 2009; Wang et al., 2015). Silenced by the stigma prescribed by failure to achieve the standards of social narratives and norms, the inner landscape of shame morphs into a sense of being ashamed, the affixing of the judgement of others to oneself. Shame is identity altered and stories narrated by dogmatic beliefs and hegemonic ideologies.

***2020, November 23: Journal***

As I think on creating new traditions, I have to acknowledge that the past five years have been filled with an overwhelm that keeps me yo-yoing between lethargy and busy body; both have been resulting in that blame/shame game and getting me nowhere. To be clear, I have done a lot over the past few years; things that I really am grateful for. But, maybe honestly speaking, not as much or not what I would have chosen to do had I not been trying to deal with kid stuff and decisions that I didn't know needed attention. Head in the sand or head barely above water??? Good question! Ah, do I actually dare make some goals?

Maybe one of the best acts of self-compassion that I can offer myself is to simply acknowledge the elephant in the private spaces of my mind; fear and overwhelm might be here for a while as I try to step away from full time housewifery and step into some sort of me-hood!

***2020, October 13: Journal***

Although I feel somewhat aware that this whole resentment/guilt/shame journey has taken so many of my days over the past few months, I am grateful that I am

starting to see that all of this may result in beauty and connection over the coming weeks, months, and years. After reading the research yesterday, my heart was both grateful and sad that how I have been feeling is not at all uncommon. I feel grateful to know that I have not lost my mind and sad to think that so many women are walking around feeling the way I have felt. I'm not sure I know any mom who needs these types of feelings!

### **Certainty/Uncertainty Shame Loop**

Prone to self-blame and mommy martyrdom when parenting challenges exceed personal resources, the deeply rooted hegemonic narrative often drives a mid-stage mother to do more and work harder as a caregiver and stress manager (Benjamin et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019; Sheldon et al., 2018).

#### ***2020, March 15: Journal***

This morning I woke up to a pretty intense nightmare. Even as I write this, I am realizing that my media consumption has gone up and this might be why my mind is so weighed down. I have had a great life, but I think there are some habits and beliefs that served their purpose for a time, but now need to be reconsidered, replaced, or refreshed. I am grateful for where I have been, but I can't help wondering where I went so wrong with the kids and our family.

#### ***2015, July 17: Journal***

It's Saturday morning and I am just now (8:05 a.m.) waking up. Seriously, when was the last time I slept in past 6 a.m.? There must be some serious adrenal fatigue and immune recovery taking place in my body. I have been exhausted, so I

am grateful for some extra time to recover. On the flip side, I am desperate to start feeling better so I can return to a normal routine. We need to get out and do something fun, so this not feeling good isn't doing any of us any good.

The hubby came home from his work conference ready to get back to work.

While he was gone, I got the house unpacked and I have almost all of the pictures hanging on the walls. I'm glad I got so much done, it will alleviate the stress so we can all have a fun weekend.

***2017, September 16: Journal***

I was reading today that our "why" will eventually define who we become. I think my "why" really needs to shift back to building family health and unity. I appreciate any time that we get to spend together, and I can see how I just need to let go of some of the stressors that fill our everyday life. I feel like, right now, it is the things that I am trying to do (like yoga and girls trips) that keep complicating our schedule and, right now, I need to keep time available for family. Getting life back on track needs to be my priority right now.

As long as I was stuck in the mommy-guilt loop of shame/self-blame, I could not seem to reclaim personal identity or maintain a sense of autonomy outside of my maternal role. I was stuck in fix it, heal it, prevent it, or monitor it mode. As long as I stayed stuck in do all and be all, for all, I could not find my way back to anything that resembled me. My choice and decision-making was skewed by the fear of what ifs. I was frozen in time, always on guard, and waiting for the other shoe to, proverbially, drop.

***2020, March 9: Journal***

I am not sure what is happening in my body/mind/spirit connection, but there is something in a misfire. I am also not sure why I am struggling to make room for self-care, but I've got to get myself into a place of trusting what I already know about eating right, exercise, and dedication to the things I love.

***2020, February 24: Journal***

I am in a real spiral today with my voice, my energy, and the weight of some things. I want to be mindful of looking on the bright side, so I don't feed the anxiety and overwhelm too much, but I also feel like I want to know what kinds of things help me to get out of the loops once they start.

***2019, December 16: Journal***

As I was preparing some thoughts for New Year's goals, I realized it has been a long time since I have actually been successful at my resolutions. This feels really frustrating, maybe because I've had some really good years with goals. I am realizing that there is so much intensity, maybe even an underlying desperation, wrapped around my goals and hopes for 2020 that maybe I'm realizing that I have lost hope! As I explore this idea, I am drawn to more of a journal concept of keeping track of 2020 in the day-to-day things.

I do want to mention the lady at the bank today. She could not have ministered to my overwhelm any better. The fact that she remembered me was beautiful. And the fact that her memory sparked in me a realization that I have hit my edge and I need to take some deliberate action and loving care to address this

tension, stress, fear, and deep seeded anger. Ah, I feel guilty even writing that!

What kind of mom is angry at her kids for struggling??

I found myself in a void, stuck in a paradigm of the untamed and unknown expanse of self-discrepancy where hope was slipping because I had no access to the goals, agency, and pathways necessary for hope to thrive.

Admittedly, I fought long and hard to stay on course with the striving narrative of the ideal. Disentangling from the shame, fear, and isolation that had me bound was a 5-year process of naming significant life events, taming my emotions, and reframing my belief systems.

***2020, April 22: Journal***

I was thinking about the writing down your soul practice again today. My knees have been in so much pain lately, which is so bizarre. I have been hesitant to blame it on lupus because I have no other signs of flare (and I don't want to put energy there). As I read about the emotional root of knee pain, I kept thinking that it might be time that I start to address the fact that the past five years have been filled with family trauma and a lot of self-doubt.

In order to tame the emotions, I found myself in a power struggle between my sense of self, my role as a mother, my hopes for the future, and the social and cultural milieu that played incessantly in my mind. Back and forth, sometimes for days, this four-way tug of war exhausted my body, mind, and soul.

Physically, I was catching every sniffle and sneezing at every tickle. Emotionally, I was sensitive, stressed, and despondent. Spiritually, I hung on as long as I could,

convinced that the master narrative of all things have purpose and faith over fear.

Socially, I stopped. I just stopped.

***2019, December 28: Journal***

Yesterday I realized that the exhaustion and pain is another sinus spiral! I caught this one and was able to get meds fast, so I am grateful for that. It made me think of all of the suffering that we go through because we don't realize that the initial pains are warning signs to sit down and take care of ourselves?

***2019, October 10: Journal***

How many do-overs does a person get? I am sick with another sinus, ear, and throat infection. I have been trying to figure out what needs to be tended to, what needs to be changed so this can be my last sickness of the decade. It seems like something about my life is slipping away and I can't figure out how to find what I don't know is gone.

With everything that has gone on in our family, I feel like small talk just feels so foreign to me, so I have no desire to just sit at Starbucks or go to lunch.

I keep hearing the phrase "act as if" which I understand from a mindset and a heart set perspective, but "what if" the best thing a person can do is just sit down and cry? The ugly cry! The swollen eyes, bring me ice cream, kind of cry!!

Despite how yucky I feel, I do have a lot to be grateful for.

***2019, June 29: Journal***

The stress in my body is getting really out of control. I have had a headache for weeks and I am anxious when I try to sit down and read. I am struggling to get to

the yoga studio and can barely put together a few coherent thoughts or ideas. I wish I knew what was going on-

***2019, August 2: Journal***

For the first time in over a week, I have felt well enough to care about anyone or anything, much less move toward goals. It has definitely been a testament to small and simple, slow, and steady-

***2015, June 16: Journal***

My body has been extremely tired, and I had hoped to get some extra rest this morning, but my heart and mind were wide awake.

It took a new paradigm, a shift from doing perfect to being present to pull back from the intricacy of every decision and every possible outcome. It took a significant shift in trusting that identity development is a long game and that re-consideration of old beliefs and ways of being takes time.

***2019, December 26: Journal***

I have spent a lot of time this week in the early hours of alone trying to figure out what I want to do and be! This morning, I realized that I have picked up a pattern of resistance that is indicative of the lack of control that I feel in my life. There has been some beauty in recognizing the weight that sits on my shoulders and in my heart. At least now I have the power to counter the weight with grace and 'let go' of the resistance. I can choose to grow out of the manure and turn towards potential.

There really is so much that has changed, altered, or been deconstructed over the past 13 months. In the process of putting 2019 to rest, it is important that I offer grace and forgiveness to all that has happened in an undesirable or imperfect way. The rug has been pulled out from underneath us and the old dirt revealed. But the beauty of fresh and clean awaits!

For some reason, everything had to fall apart before I could put anything back together. This may not be the path that everyone takes, but it was clearly the only path that worked for me. From my relationship with my children, my spouse, and my friends to the critical relationship that I have found with myself, I had to let the puzzle pieces fall to the floor. And one by one, piece by piece, I will continue to piece together a new image; something that looks a little more like me.

The story often told says you failed,

You did not.

The story suggests that you were distracted,

You were not.

The story points out that if you had done better than things would be better.

Who knows?

But what if, just what if, the real secret to motherhood is that if you showed up and you got up; if you hugged, held, watched, listened, or sat then you have played a beautiful part in the maternal role. Whether a friend, aunt, sister, or mother, maybe the magic of motherhood is not in what you do, but simply in who you are.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE ESSENCE OF PATHWAYS AND PARADIGMS

If we have to recalibrate everything, we should start with what we love the most.

—Taylor Swift, *The Long Pond sessions*

#### **There are Days**

Still, there are days that I cannot breathe. But now, there are more days where I feel so much gratitude as I listen to nature singing her simple songs.

On these days, I take long walks and savor small moments.

Still, there are days that I cannot stop the tears. But now, there are more days where comfort is my guide as nature blows grief straight through me.

On these days, I take long walks and honor the sorrow.

Still, there are days that thought and understanding fail me; days where I feel so overwhelmed by all that I did not, and still do not, know.

But now, there are more days where stillness and peace stay with me, showing me that when nothing is certain, all things are possible.

On these days, I take long walks and trust in the fullest potential.

And, still, there are days when shame chases me down seeking for ways to remind me of everything that I should have done; days where shame stalks my heart to nag me for things that I failed to do, haunting me for all that I have done wrong.

On these days, though I might have to look harder, I look for gratitude, comfort, and stillness in the bees buzz and the hum of the crickets' evening strum.

But, mostly, on these days I give myself permission to sit in my emotions and let shame simply pass me by.

***2019, July 23: Journal (to Instagram)***

We currently have three mid-sized dogs that live with us; one very serious and focused and, two, very spirited and playful! I have to confess that I have had a love/hate relationship with these dogs, but that is another story 😊

I have become the dog walker in the morning and, besides getting their excited energy leashed up, it is a manageable one-person job.

Today, however, our morning walk resulted in a scene that left me sprawled on the ground, flat on my back, and flailing to catch the three dogs as they ran, excitedly in multiple different directions.

Within seconds, I was sprawled out on the ground, one leash wrapped around my waist, one leash caught around my foot, and another leash, somehow, freed from its previously attached dog.. For a brief moment, I tried to stand back up. Instead, I realized, I only had full access to my core if I stayed down.

As I sat on the ground, wondering which way was up, I realized how close to real-life this situation was!

1. We can be walking merrily along, enjoying the beauty of life. Then, without warning, we might find ourselves falling flat on the ground, not quite sure what to do next.

2. Sometimes it's easier to gather our strength by, first, re-centering our core; the core values, traits, and priorities that give us the leverage to stand up, find our footing, and carry on.

3. Plugged into the noise can keep us distracted and unaware just enough that we lose sight of where we are.

4. Not every fall is colored by fault, blame, or shame. Sometimes, life just takes us down.

Overcoming obstacles isn't so much about the fall or the fail or the fast pace...

Sometimes, we overcome our obstacles by getting a little creative; by stepping back, sitting down, and waiting for the moment to pass.

And, sometimes, when we fall, we stay down long enough to choose to look up before we get up!

### **One-Way Pathways**

It was in the moments that I gave myself permission to sit in my emotions and let the shame simply pass me by that I started finding hope, MY hope. It was a hope purchased in the pause, not in the hustle.

### ***2019, July 5: Yoga Memo***

I had a conversation with someone at a recent conference who suggested that the only people who are in need of hope are the hopeless- the lost souls, the critically ill, the socially forgotten and ignored.

I was reminded of this conversation yesterday as we moved KMP to Brooklyn.

To say that I am rooted in confidence about this move would be a Pinocchio sized lie. So, I hold onto hope by looking for hope in the smallest of details:

I find hope in the clean apartment that we moved my daughter into,

I find hope when the lost furniture delivery is found,

I find hope in the landlord who checked and double checked our identity,

I find hope in the Brooklyn pizzeria where Angelo tells my daughter to come back anytime she wants to talk to a friend,

I find hope in the movie theatre Target that is a short walk from her apartment,

I find hope in the stranger who tells us the best places in Brooklyn for ice cream and a friendly face,

I find hope,

I find hope,

I find hope...

Hope is nothing like my constantly misplaced phone or my car keys; hope isn't lost, and hope is not found~

Hope is sought out in the details, hope is found in the minutia, and hope is seen only when one looks for it.

And, in every new layer of hope that I honored, I was able to find the gift of grace. This was a grace not purchased by authority, nor was it a grace earned by my obedience. I found grace that was made possible by the simplicity of savoring the perfection of every imperfect moment that lies between the mundane and the milestones.

***2020, January 2: Journal***

The reflection time of this past month has been life changing for me this year. I've spent a lot of time reflecting with my kids this year. As we look back to January 2019, we can see so much growth from obstacles overcome, setbacks that stopped us in our tracks, and beauty that can only be appreciated by staring down our flaws.

Though I have been setting one-word intentions for the new year for more than a decade, I have never set a one-word salutation at the end of the year. However, in my reflections and gratitude, the one little word that seems most important to me is the word that closes out my 2019-  
GRACE~

I sat with KLaP last night as we were planning for her future- a future that is so bright and so full of potential and possibility. She has some big goals that are backed with lots of purpose and desire. A lot can happen in one year; so much so that it can be easy to forget how far we have come when we are measuring ourselves against where we think we should be. Reflecting back on how far she has come was a perfect segue for the discussion on far she can go!

Rather than searching outside of me, the hope, and the grace that I found had always been a part of me.

***2019, July 1: Yoga Memo***

At the beginning of each new cycle, whether it's a week, a month, or a year; I look back before I plan forward. I'm a big believer in pearls of wisdom and flecks of dust that become the riches in our treasury of life and love!

This week, I've felt drawn to count my ups and downs of the past TEN years. At first, I took only a mental inventory of where I was and who I was 10 years ago. And, classic to my personality, I let this get bigger.

I started listing my Top 10 in lots of areas!

My 10 favorite songs, 10 years of growth, 10 moments that I cherish, 10 books I love to read, 10 people who've inspired my journey...

There is often a push to leave the past behind you in order to move into tomorrow. I think this is an incomplete habit in living and loving in TODAY.

Hope, Joy, Grace, and Compassion rely on being present in today while honoring ALL of the bits and pieces of ourselves that we gather along the journey.

When we offer the grace and compassion of who we are today to our past self, we can gather wisdom and gratitude as we recognize that we did the best we could with what we knew at the time. The shadows of the past only exist when we judge yesterday with today's insight.

We find resilience for the challenges and obstacles of today when we have a sense of hope and joy for our Future. Hope and Joy for tomorrow trust in the strength and commitment of our past experiences.

We are an intricate weave of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Trying to take our hands off of one will only loosen our connection to the others. The key is to hold what works and release what doesn't.

Every memory, dream, and moment we hold should always point to the seeds of purpose and the harvest of bounty.

If it weighs you down, Let it Go.

But, if it serves a purpose, no matter how heavy it feels...

Hold it, See it, Nourish it... Let in the potential of learning from the past in order to fortify the future.

Though I had checked all of the boxes and I had toed all of the lines, my family fell off the map of the ideal. At the very heart of my religious upbringing had been a belief in agency, a freedom to choose for ourselves. But this freedom to choose was based on a belief that there was a right way and a wrong way to move through the journey of life. I found that I could no longer justify someone else defining what was right and what was wrong for me or for my family.

***2020, August 15: Journal***

As I look to begin this day with a deep desire to shed the final 'weight' off of my heart and soul, I feel the words clarity and joy singing out for attention. I know

that I have been gifted and blessed over the years, and I also know that I have spent so many years feeling guilt and fear because of these gifts.

I really am so amazed that the church society believes that we come to this earth to prove our worth! Ah, so much time spent on that one belief! Of all of the pregnancy weight I have gained and lost over the years, this is the ‘maternal’ weight that I am most excited to shed. As I walk, this morning, I hope to reconcile what this means about God! Is he tied to the church? Is he tied to me? Maybe that’s where the clarity and joy come in. Maybe I just let clarity unfold as I get to wrap myself in something entirely new.

***2019, December 20: Journal***

As I have been reflecting on the final days of this decade, I keep wondering if the clarity that we are all talking about for 2020 is actually hidden in the challenges. The past decade, for our family, has been filled with challenges and obstacles, victories, and total wipe outs. As I think of the person I was as 2009 turned to 2010, I am so different. Some parts of me I like, some parts of me are still in stress mode (I’m hoping those change). I can say that the big life obstacles of 2018 and 2019 led to a HUGE growth in our family and our relationships. I am grateful we are all safe.

Despite my desire to have a sense of safety and security, I am learning to sit in the uncertainty of the journeys of my children finding their own way.

Likewise, at the heart of the intense mother milieu is the pressure to control for best possible outcomes for our offspring. It is a pressure that leads to role overload,

unrealistic socially prescribed expectations, social isolation, and pervasive maternal blame (Henderson et al., 2016; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Rizzo et al., 2013). And, yet this outdated ideology and narrative continues so loud and so obtrusive that it is nearly impossible to ignore.

***2018, November 12: Yoga Recording***

As we prepare for our practice, eyes soft and body relaxed, we take a deep breath in, and we release a big sigh out of the mouth. Today, we breathe in possibility, and we release comparison. Today, we commit to the fullness of today's practice by listening for the whisper of truth in our hearts and releasing pressure to do as others might by keeping eyes on our own mat. Trust that the heart, from grace, will not lead you away. But life, when judged by another, will tempt your love for self to stray.

***2021, September 1: Journal***

I was walking this morning, the first time that I have walked post-surgery and the first time that I have walked with no dogs, no spouse, no kids, and no emotion for a very long time. Today, I just felt called to wake up and enjoy the sunrise.

I had to circle the park three times to catch the sun as it rose over the peak of the tree line in the distance. I knew where the sun would rise, so I knew to patiently walk and wait. I don't know why, but this made me giggle as I thought how nice it would be if I could be this confident in the way my own inner light will rise each day.

The sunrise is pretty consistent when the skies are clear. There may be little, subtle shifts as the seasons come and go, but I can be pretty confident in how the sun will shine through the trees and sparkle as the sun's rays hit the dewy drops on the grasses of the field as I walk each day.

This whole game changes when it is cloudy. When the clouds are out, the storm is pending, or the rains have burst, I am not always as sure how the sun will shine through it all. The clouds, the moisture, the rain, the snow... it all has significant impact on how the sun's rise will cast its rays.

So, it is with our lives. Perhaps the living practice of grace is simply a matter of seeing the clouds as they roll in and out of our lives and, simply, trusting that our brightest light is still there; our greatest light hasn't gone anywhere, it is just clouded by the momentary storm.

As I considered all of the ways that my lifeworld perspective had been influenced by the songs that I had heard, the images that I had seen, and the stories that I had been told, I slowly realized that I had no idea how to step off of the path of ideal and onto a path of new possibilities. I had never heard of best-case scenarios of people who were not following the norm of the idyllic tale. At church, in the media, and deep in our cultural narrative is the story of the ideal. Woven into the narrative is a maternal storyline that says that you either succeed or you fail!

Two options. That. Is. It.

*2020, October 10: Journal*

The contrast of my heart and soul today has been so much more than I have been able to handle without shedding a few tears and uttering a lot of swear words.

Maybe my walk this morning was more of a call to attention than I realized at the time. The day was still dark, but light enough that I could see subtle light of the clear early morning sky. I could still see Mars and the tiny, whispered sliver of moonlight above the house. Still too early for its rise, the sun was casting just a hint of a kiss on the horizon.

As I walked, my heart gave into the beauty of the stillness and the thoughts that we must make seeing beauty a choice. Not only must we choose to see beauty but, sometimes we must know where to look so we find the beauty. Not everyone will make the choice to wake up at 5 am to catch this view, and that's okay. It doesn't mean that the beauty isn't there, nor does it mean the beauty is wasted on some or unappreciated by others.

This doesn't negate my experience. It's just a choice that I make, albeit a choice I am glad I make!

In all of the conversations with my friends, all of the lessons at church, and all of the advice in parenting books there was heavy hearted and fear focused storyboarding of meeting the ideal or falling prey to failure, sadness, and suffering. Briefly mentioned were the rare stories of struggle, told only through an abbreviated master narrative of the heroes journey. Stories that tell of moments of tragedy that led to personal triumph.

Inundated by images of perfection, scant are the representations of the messy days, the down on our knees, wading through the mire, barely breathing days.

***2019, April 30: Journal***

Today, I received three compliments in my 3-minute blood draw appointment about my sunny shirt and casual hair bun.

Yup, it's my get out of the shower and dress for comfort days that get me the beauty compliments. Honestly, I am good with that. I love me an old pair of jeans and a worn-out pair of flip flops.

As I left the doctor's office, I thought, maybe it is supposed to be that simple. I think we try so hard to be what we think we are supposed to be that we forget to show up in who we are.

Hmmm, food for thought today!

What if, I began to consider, that this freedom to choose under the weight of social judgement fosters more fear than it does hope-led cognitions and grace-filled relationships?

What if creating a one-way path for all, actually, creates emotional distance for many?

What if, I began to consider, that by presenting only one RIGHT way to do life, we are really creating NO way out of the box of ideal for those who cannot find themselves in the hegemonic molds?

***2020, August 19: Journal***

As I think about making choices and setting my new course, I keep thinking about the difference between a beautifully choreographed dance and the choppy-ness of an 80's head banging or grunge band. I have been in a state of grace multiple times in my life and find myself feeling like it is with a grateful heart, mind, and spirit that I can choose and succeed. I still don't know how to establish some of the traditions that I do miss. Just the simple stuff that feels a little uncertain and awkward.

***2020, August 10: Journal***

I went outside with the dogs tonight and could not help but to look up at the small sliver of the moon. Even in the tiniest of a sliver, in all of the darkness of the deep night sky, we still look up.

Isn't that amazing?

Of course, in the daytime it's easy to look to the clouds, the blueness of the sky, and the sun; it's easy to see all that is possible when the sun is up, and the sky is blue.

But even when we aren't quite sure what we will see or find, when all is dark and unsure, we still look up at the possibility of the twinkle in the nights' sky! The moon, unlike the sun, offers us something slightly different each night, transitioning just a little through her many cycles. She transitions with grace but her subtle change has the power to impact the seas and the energy of all of Earth. She feels no pressure other than to be exactly where she is in her cycle.

The honest to God truth is that I have no idea who I am when I consider freedom to choose. I can't remember a time when I didn't consider the consequences of choice.

They say that we go first to anger because it is the darkest emotion that is socially acceptable to feel. Anger leads to the fastest route to action. As I've been considering all of my pent-up emotions, emotions that are much deeper than anger, I can see why I have struggled over the past year staying in my own peace. There is this feeling that I am being pigeon-holed into a 'story' that's not mine and forced into a cloak that I don't want to wear.

***2020, April 23: Journal***

It started to rain just as I left with the dogs this morning. I really needed some time alone, so I kept going, hoping it would stop. Three steps later, the rain broke, and I had a great long walk. I just needed to keep moving forward. What a beautiful reminder, especially after the thoughts on my knee pain a few days ago. I just need to decide to keep moving forward and trust that, eventually, all storms will break.

***2020, May 23: Journal***

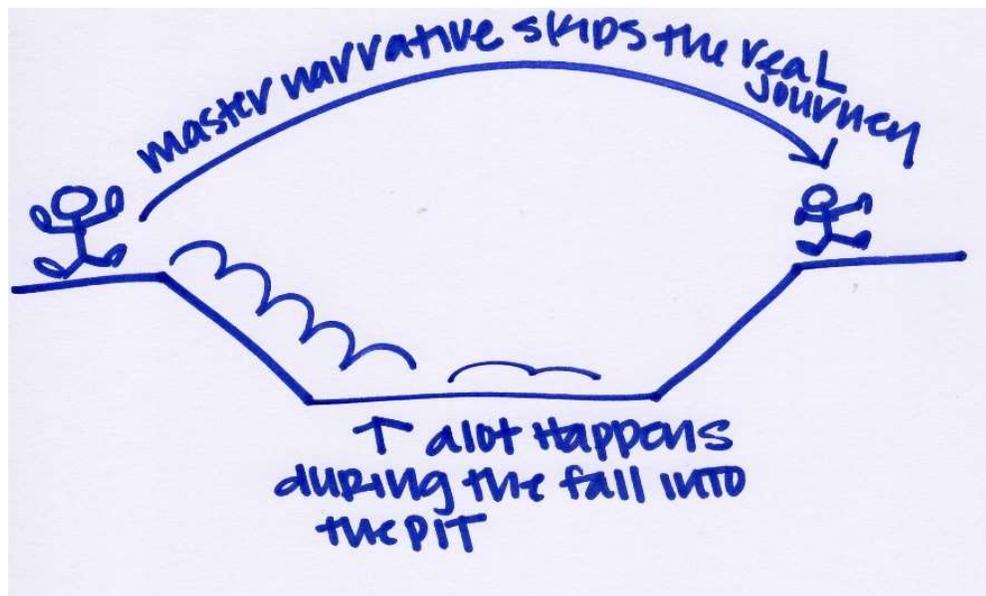
This morning I can see the GAP between where I am and where I want to be (see Figure 12). I can see how letting go of the heavy of the past few years will give me access to all that I need to get over the gap. What comes up for me, more than anything else is that I need to hold joy and gratitude for the present moment; to let

go, enjoy the journey, sit in the moment, and trust that everything will work out.

Only the pain and the bitterness can hold me back from being who I want to be.

**Figure 12**

*Doodle of Master Narrative*



For me, the transformation is that I can accept that there is no one pathway to any life destination. There is no reality in the concept of being “done” when it comes to life, love, and the lived experience of hope and joy. The lived experience of becoming is a moving, breathing, ever-changing process of learning and growing within the emotional landscape of moments, milestones, and memories. We will never be done, and we simply cannot get life wrong.

The greatest transformation in my heart and our home? I openly talk about trauma and engage with emotions without the consequence of fear of judgement. Instead of looking at life as if I will have to pay a debt collector for all of my mistakes and mishaps, I look for ways to learn in my being. Instead of fearing that I will find memories of error

after error after misstep, I look back at the past with grace. Instead of looking at all of the dirt and the mud, I look at the past with the perspective of a miner of the dust that becomes a rich treasure.

The greatest transformation in my family? We make space for healing, and we have an active plan for practicing grace. We leave room for quitting, stopping, and taking breaks. We leave room for looking back and moving forward.

I would love to say that I handled things well.

I did not.

I would love to say that I danced gracefully with this new beat.

I did not.

I would love to say that I have no feelings of doubt and uncertainty.

I cannot.

What I can say, what I know for sure, is that I have stepped out of my comfort zone; I have stepped out of the rigid rules and paved pathways of the idolized imagery of perfection as the destination. I have let go of the ideology that there is only one way to be, believe, and become.

## CHAPTER X

### THE ESSENCE OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: LIVING THE EXPERIENCE

As a work of both art and science, I have come to appreciate that the very foundation of an autoethnography is an honest appraisal of one's lived experience, an examination of one's sense of being, believing, and becoming within the perceived narratives and constructs of the lifeworld. Autoethnography is an embodied work of heart, mind, and soul where the researcher becomes the research, and the research transforms the researcher.

#### **Choosing Autoethnography**

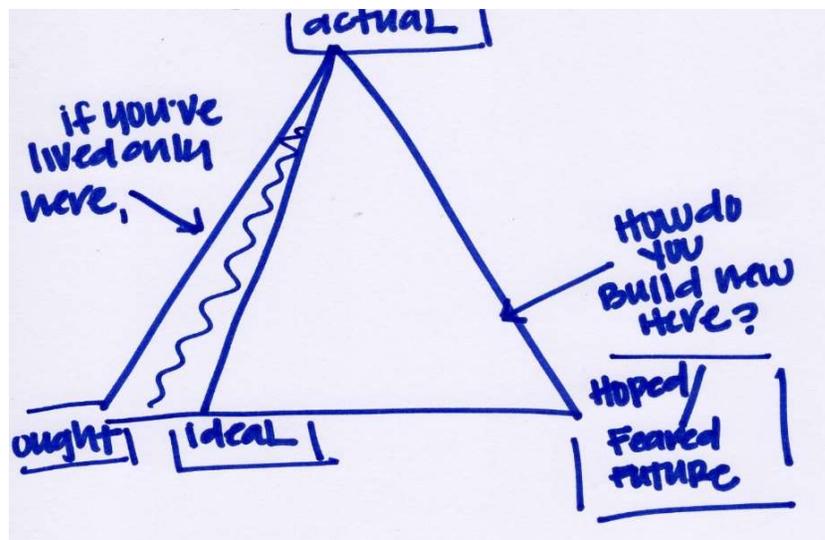
Similar to the journey from identity exploration to identity commitment, an autoethnography requires a willingness to be vulnerable and raw as the researcher practices self-reflection. As with identity exploration, the rigor of autoethnography is grounded in the researcher being honest, thorough, open, and authentic for the purpose of becoming a testament that generates changed conversations, the potential for radical social change. Through the investigation of my journal entries, I was led to identify secreted aspects of my sense of self within the context of social, cultural, and familial environments and trends; in many ways I was changed, no longer the same student, wife, mother, or researcher that I was before this work began (Ettorre, 2017).

It took me a full year to decide on an autoethnography. In truth, it took me longer to find the courage and commitment to choose autoethnography as my methodology than it took me to write this autoethnographic study. The journey into autoethnography led me

further away from recalling the intimacy of stories and guided me deeper into the essence of my lived experience with myself. One's relationship with self is always changing, evolving through and with the lived experience of significant life events and critical moments of impact (Praherso et al., 2017; Stanley & Stanley, 2017). One's relationship with self is a living dynamic between what is learned and felt through the experiences that shape and mold our sense of being and belonging (Cyr et al., 2015; Hardy et al., 2017). In like manner, an autoethnography changes and evolves throughout the working process. Though I had hoped to present a study that represented a journey from beginning to end, encased within a 6-year block of calendar time, I quickly realized that it is difficult to find a beginning to our lived experience and, nearly, impossible to locate a point where identity commitment ends (see Figure 13).

**Figure 13**

*Doodle of Identity Pyramid*



Through active and continued self-reflection and reflexivity I came to find unexpected answers to my original research questions. It may come as no surprise that, as I report the data from this study, I conclude this project with more questions than I had in the beginning.

### **Writing Autoethnography**

With this narrative bricolage, I offer an invitation into the essence of my lived experience with the personal stories and happenings that shaped, and re-shaped, my felt sense of identity and self-concept as a middle-stage mother. With access to the liminal spaces and dual landscaping of the events and meanings ascribed to experience of felt discrepancy between my actual self and the ought ideals of dominant motherhood milieus, my intention is to give voice to the pervasiveness of hegemonic milieus and give life to the stories and experiences that are often silenced by stigma (Ettorre, 2017; Wang et al., 2015).

The onus, for an autoethnographic researcher, is the honest locating of one's fingerprints on the data. This work is a compilation of stories, thoughts, emotions, and illustrations that have been gathered from my personal notes and archives. Through the reflexive sharing of a storied narrative, an individual is afforded a deeper understanding of past experiences and one's perceived sense of self and relational other (Welch et al., 2020). Locating my voice was much easier than recognizing the inner voice that narrates my journal entries. Revealed through this work is many layers of perspective taking and meaning making, often an amalgamation of my roles as a student and researcher intersecting with my roles as a wife, mother, yogi, teacher, friend, and peer.

Locating the stories proved easy. Sorting through the stories proved emotional. Identifying the lived transformation proved empowering. In hindsight, I have realized that the value in intentional reflection is in the details and the meaning. In the process of writing an autoethnography, I became aware of how often our stories are silenced. So often, if the story is not quieted by silencing, the lived experience is silenced through masking.

We may use pseudonyms and change names when we write an autobiography.

We may close our doors when we want to share something intimate or private.

We may cry when no one is looking.

We may scream into an empty car when no one can hear.

Finding, and giving, voice to the silenced stories proved more vulnerable, raw, uncertain, and intimidating than I could have imagined.

### **My Journal Journey**

I have been keeping a written record of daily events for as long as I can remember. Though it would be inaccurate to claim that I have been writing every day, I feel comfortable to say that I have been inconsistently consistent in recording the events of my daily life throughout the years. My earliest memories are of writing ‘Dear Diary,’ at the beginning of each entry; writing, perhaps to the imagined sage that lied in the pages of my pink leopard skin-patterned, faux fur-covered diary. Though those early diaries had both a lock and key, I often lost the keys and threw the diaries away if I suspected that my younger sister had found my hiding place.

Over the years, I have written free form at the beginning of the day, and I have kept gratitude journals that were written at the end of each night. I have journaled in photo, in writing, and in collaged images of the vision of my future. I recall my nightly dreams in a journal, and I have made a quilted journal representing the significant life events of my grandmother's life. I have followed daily journaling prompts, joined structured journaling groups, and diligently adhered to the journaling journey of *The Artist's Way* (Cameron, 1992) and *Writing Down Your Soul* (Conner, 2009).

With so much time spent journaling, one might assume that I have an extensive archive of documented thoughts, experiences, and memories. The reality is that I have more markers and pen sets than I have journals saved. Though it has never been an intentional decision, I have come to realize that I have been throwing my journals away for as long as I have been writing in them. The truth is that it was only after the insistence of a friend and fellow doctoral student that I retrieved the journals used for this research from the dumpster just hours before they were taken away by my local waste management services.

### **My Journals' Silence**

In addition to the realization that my journals often meet a fateful demise, I was struck that my data collection revealed how infrequently my children are named in my journal writings. In the recounting of the events and emotions of my daily life over the past 6 plus years, I found that only one journal consistently uses the names of the people with whom I share this life journey. Likewise, rare is the naming of the event or emotion in much of my daily writing. It was in looking for the story of my lived experience that I

had stumbled on the first of many indications of the silencing and secreting of some of the most vulnerable, raw, and intimate of my events that have shaped my current self.

Perhaps the fear of being discovered by my sister, spouse, children, or grandchildren has been enough to send the written records of my lived experience into the literal, and figurative, garbage cans and fire pits? Perhaps the cultural narrative taught by my church leaders, that of maintaining faith-filled journals to inspire generations of my noble posterity through the obstacles of the future has kept me destroying every shred of my thoughts and feelings? Or, perhaps, the shadows of my inner experience has been filtered through the expectations of a master narrative that mandates a frame of positive thinking, rainbows after storms, and silver linings?

Again, more questions.

### **Being Autoethnography**

Contemplative practices and mindfulness training often highlight self-reflection as an adaptive coping skill, especially after significant life events. The process of writing, re-telling, and re-storying a personal narrative is akin to the artistic creation of piecing together a puzzle as individuals explore how and where their story fits into the grand scheme of complex social phenomena (Carter et al., 2018; Qvortrup & Nielsen, 2019; Welch et al., 2020). As each piece of the puzzle is matched, the greater whole of the image becomes clear. Mindful rumination reflects an active participation in re-considering the pieces of one's life puzzle, a curiosity and exploration as old ways of being are offered creative placement in new patterns of becoming. Through an in-depth exploration, mindful rumination invites individuals to practice direct engagement in

repetitive thoughts, while observing the logical or emotional topics (Delker et al., 2020; Marin & Shkreli, 2019).

Through the daily practice of being autoethnography, I was challenged to face narratives and storylines that had long had an impact on my emotional and relational well-being. Through the gathering of data, I saw gaps in my own sense of self that I had been unable to see while I was in the thick of supporting my children through the emotional, mental, and spiritual identity distress of their adolescent years. The course of rebuilding my assumptive world has been a painful process for me.

I am one person in a family of eight.

I am, daily, reminded of how things used to be.

And I am, daily, reminded of how pervasive the old patterns seek to haunt my memories and plague my assumptive future.

I have had to unpack old belief systems, address my need to mask, and identify boundaries that had never crossed my mind to draw. Like the aftershocks of a major earthquake, when many of my core beliefs were shaken, habits that I had long thought steady and established began to crumble too. Some foundations have been stressed while others have tumbled to ground zero.

### ***My Voice as Researcher***

As the researcher collecting data from the research, I found myself being both the study and the student. For me, this has been a matter of self-discovery outside of my maternal role. The process of being autoethnography has, not so gently, encouraged me to ask myself some difficult questions.

Who am I outside of motherhood?

What do I believe outside of my family?

And how do I keep the foundation of my family pieces moving if I change the core of who I am and what I believe?

Again, more questions.

The data, from this study, reveals that the fear of rejection has been rich. The data, from this study, reveals a deeply seeded commitment to the master narrative, driven by a fear of being deemed someone who lacks faith and integrity; someone not quite good enough to hold things together let alone keep things from crumbling. These fears linger like a toothache. I miss many aspects of my old self that diligently tried to fit into the hegemonic molds. I miss layers of our family that have changed through the years. I mourn, frequently, for the me that I thought I would one day be.

At the same time, there are many traditions and beliefs systems that I cannot imagine returning to. I am grateful that exploring my own beliefs has led to a new, and open, way to have honest and wholehearted conversations with my children about their beliefs. There are days I wish I did not know some of the things I know. And there are days that I am grateful that I have been gifted access to their identity-seeking journeys.

### ***My Voice as Research***

Life is a collection of stories. There are stories we might share without reserve. There are stories that we might reserve, and not share. There are stories so sacred, so intimate that they are shared with, only, a very select few. And there are stories, so intricately woven with the stories of others, that a rich mosaic is created from the

shattered pieces of dreams displaced and the glue of heart-felt emotions. In these stories, the bricolage of lived experience, it can be difficult to identify where one person's story ends and another's story begins.

Often laden with emotion, it is these shared stories that are often small parts of a greater whole; journeys of lives changed, identities shaped, and relationships forged. These stories, these stories shaped through life's formidable moments, are often held in the silent space of waiting for the sun to rise after many long, dark, and lonely nights; nights where prayers are uttered, and tears shed.

Stories silenced as private.

Sacred.

Intimate.

Stories, sometimes, silenced by shame.

My journaling voice is a written reflection of the felt experience of my selfhood as I interacted with the people, places, and events of my daily life. Within my journals there is a pattern of organizing and constructing a sense of the happenings that aligns with the literature on using personal narratives to inform present, and future, research gaps (Adams et al., 2017; Nolan et al., 2017). Often used as a fundamental mode of understanding lived experience, the personal narrative of journals guides the emotional and cognitive processing of an individual's needs, wishes, dreams, and disappointments (Qvortrup & Nielsen, 2019; Wang et al., 2015).

Like many older adults, much of my personal journal writing has been turned toward finding the positive, often turning away from the negative and silencing the events

and the emotions of the life experience (Ready et al., 2007; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). Yet, it is in the union of emotional expression and cognitive processing that self-reflection is likely to yield the greatest well-being benefits for individuals and lend valuable perspective for future empirical study (Adams et al., 2017; Ready et al., 2007; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). Throughout the research process, I discovered significant life events that were omitted from my writings. Details and memories of some of life's most bitter and sweet moments, missing and without written meaning. Why, I keep asking, was I silencing these stories from myself? If we silence our stories from ourselves, I wonder, will we really divulge our stories to others?

Again, more questions.

### **Evaluating Autoethnography**

In many ways, my decision to do an autoethnography dissertation mirrors my exploration of self while attempting to stay true to my established role as a mother. At times, this has weighed heavy as an additional burden of forging new paths and treading in deep and uncharted waters. Try as I might, there is no rubric, rulebook, or guideline for the narrative writing of an autoethnography. Without a pattern or a model to follow, breaking the script of tradition has proved to be a tremendous act of self-trust. This has been, both, challenging and liberating as I find myself growing as a student, researcher, and family scientist.

Writing an autoethnography for academia requires a commitment to the vulnerable and honest appraisal of the storied data. Similarly, the evaluation of an autoethnography requires that the reader step into an emotional and subjective

partnership with the research, committing to a vulnerable and honest appraisal of the myriad ways that research is influenced by lived experience (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). From the storied “I” to the emotionality of personal vignettes, the evaluation of autoethnography requires an embodiment of subjectivity and story-listening (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2016; O’Hara, 2018; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Without rubric, rulebook, or guideline the evaluation of autoethnography can reveal new layers of self for the reader as well as the researcher.

My journals are laden with a-ha moments; moments where my perspective shifted so rapidly that I felt my emotional, mental, and spiritual ground shake beneath the unrooted footing of my lost sense of self. Often discovered where I least expected it, these gestalten moments revealed themselves as miracles made manifest through the most simple and mundane (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2016). Though this work reflects the narrative of my lived experience with self-concept and identity, the evaluation of this autoethnography may challenge the reader to explore their own deeper sense of self as, together, we traverse the lesser worn paths of doing, being, and evaluating autoethnography (Adams et al., 2017; Ettore, 2017; Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

For this work, I have bridged two types of autoethnography, layered accounts and personal narratives (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). I have used, as my compass, the three-fold purpose of this research:

1. To give voice to a woman’s lived experience of self when the maternal role includes navigating the distressed or discrepant identity-seeking of adolescent offspring.

2. To introduce the criticality of interweaving empirical dialog with the phenomenon of lived experience of selfhood for motherhood framed within cultural and societal hegemonic ideologies, expectations, and public appraisals.

3. To explore the unexplored phenomena of meaning making and moments of impact on maternal identity in middle-stage motherhood.

### **Pieces and Patches**

My grandmother was a faithful genealogist. She had dedicated most of her adult life to the gathering of 10 plus generations of ancestral data and stories on, both, her paternal and maternal lineage. I had heard stories of the few family members that had kept written journals but, for most of these ancestors, stories had been long forgotten and the only artifacts we had were of photos, certificates, and land deeds. At her passing, I was tasked with eulogizing her life and offering thoughts on her legacy. Though I knew many of the facts that quantified her life, I did not choose to share any of the details from the certificates, land deeds, and data files.

Having spent many hours by her side, I also knew many of the stories of her life. And, yet I did not feel compelled to memorialize my grandmother through a colorful synopsis of her life. Instead, I shared my thoughts of how she had quilted our family together with as much care, and with as many scraps, as the quilts that she had so carefully crafted throughout her life. As seen through my perspective, neither story nor narrative chronology, I shared with her family and friends the essence of my grandmothers legacy, one small aspect of lived experience and shared journeys.

A sample of this and a dab of that, an individual's life can be summed up by a gathering of minutes, moments, and milestones strung together to create a collection of stories. There are some stories that we might share without reserve and some stories that we might reserve for a select few. There are stories that we hear and stories that we feel. Story sharing is an act of meaning making, emotional processing, and social connection. Critical to self-discovery and fundamental to human connection, narrative story sharing is an intentional sharing of identity, selfhood, and relationship with significant others. It is through storied narrative that individuals explore the felt experience of their selfhood, their sense of "I" (Delker et al., 2020; Ettore, 2017).

### **I is for Identity**

Integrity.

I have thought about this word a lot lately.

Integrity, INTEGRITY. Hmmm, Integrity? Is this a character trait? Is this an attribute of identity? Is this a core value? Is it a verb? A noun? An adverb?

Danielle LaPorte (2017) defined core values as the goals of the soul; the feelings we desire in the being and becoming of life while we are busy in the hustle of all of the doing-ness of life.

Maybe living with integrity is more about living the core values that we find integral to our own unique ways of being, believing, and becoming. Perhaps living true to one's sense of self, one's concept of identity, is less about the nitty gritty of the stories we tell and more about the moments that make a big enough impact that our core, most integral, values are given the opportunity to shine.

Perhaps living true to one's sense of self, one's concept of identity, is less about the story of loss, tragedy, and triumph and more about trusting that when integral moments shake our foundation and force us to our knees we have, within us, the skills, tools, and resources to find our way back to standing. Standing tall. Standing strong. Standing solid.

I often find myself in a symbolic arm wrestle with the vision of my, now outdated presumptive future self and the uncertainty of tomorrow. There is a lingering paradox to the evolution and transformation of my sense of self as dreams shift and new hopes emerge from the memories of yesterday and the vision of tomorrow (Baumann & Braddick, 2016). I still get hit with moments of utter sadness, grief, and despondent overwhelm for this life that I had spent so many hours investing in, working toward. I had followed the script and rehearsed all of the lines for a life with church sanctioned marriages and service missions. A life filled with college degrees, grandchildren, family travel, and a mid-stage career that seamlessly fit into my family dreams.

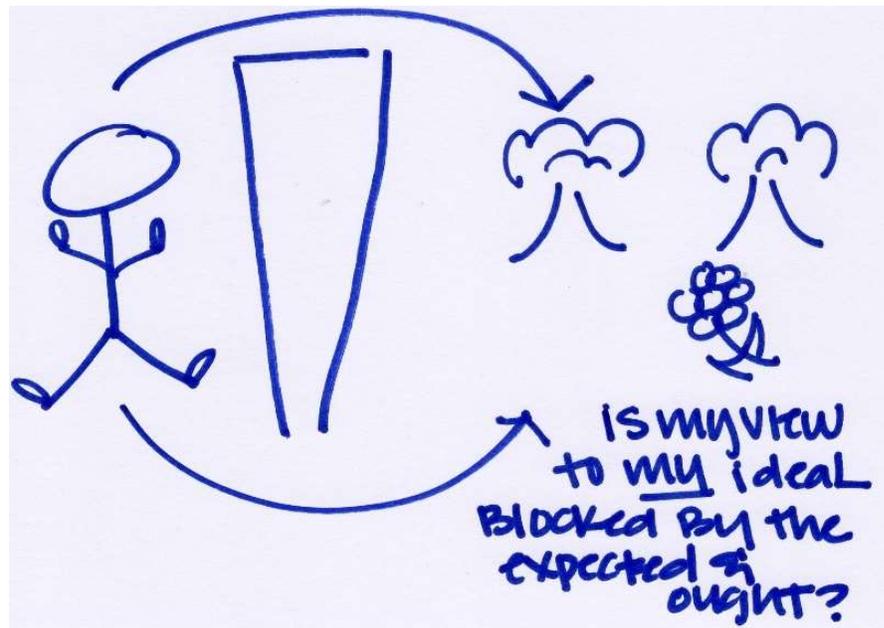
But, when I pull back the story and return to the integral core values that I was investing in, I have to take notice that who I am has nothing to do with a social narrative or culturally sanctioned lifestyle. Who I am has nothing to do with what my children do, or do not do.

I still get moments of extreme guilt that by subscribing to the hegemonic ideals of my family, my religious community, and societies narratives, I was inadvertently training my children to conform to the maladaptive traits indicative of socially prescribed

perfectionism (see Figure 14). I was inadvertently taking the trait characteristics of hope, the key attributes of their sense of I Am, away from my children.

**Figure 14**

*Doodle of Beyond the Block*

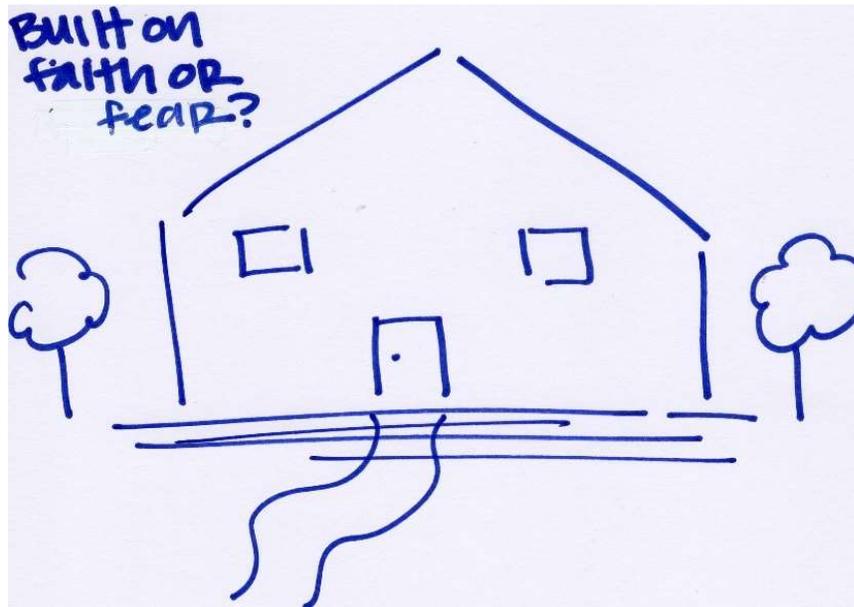


**A is for A-Ha**

My greatest A-Ha, dare I say, my empirically rooted, academic amen is that identity is a sacred relationship with self. My sense of I am has changed drastically in the past 5–7 years. There is no room for shoulds, coulds, our ought to haves when it comes to being, believing, and becoming. Regardless of religious, societal, familial, or cultural narratives, I have come to consider that any affiliation that seeks to define the lived experience of selfhood takes from the individual the foundation of hope and the embodiment of authentic connection with other (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15**

*Doodle of Home*



What I know for sure is that I cannot know anything for certain.

I can trust the journey.

I can trust the pivot.

I can trust the wait.

Though I may not be able to plan for or prepare for, every possible outcome, I can learn to sit in the gap moments and do what is most needed in that void.

I can learn to sit.

I can learn to rest.

And, most critical, I can get quiet within myself so as to quiet the opinions, expectations, and ascribed narratives that swirl around me. In the quiet, I can trust the beauty of not knowing what is next.

When it comes to the felt concept of self and identity, it is fluid, dynamic, and ever-changing. There is no possible way to define how to be, what to believe, and who we can become. Every day offers a new and blank slate to choose again.

I still write to do lists.

But now, I also write to be lists.

I still get caught up in the hustle of worth.

But now, I also enjoy floating in the stillness of good enough.

I still worry, fret, and fear.

But now, I also savor, trust, and transmute fear into lived experience.

I still feel a need to do, be, and learn more.

But now, I also honor the wisdom that shows up when I need it most.

I still see my weaknesses and struggles as heavy burdens.

But now, I also see grace, beauty, and gratitude.

## CHAPTER XI

### PARADIGM SHIFTS: SEISMIC AND SUBTLE

To plan for a brighter tomorrow, we must thoughtfully consider yesterday and lean with intention into the moments of today.

—2021, Sept. 16: Journal

#### **Tonight, it Feels Seismic**

Tonight, as I walked home from the park, a small dog was running free from the confines of his leash. His teen charge was frantically calling for the dog to stop and return to the safety of his owner's arms.

#### ***2021, September 26: Journal***

Tonight, as I walked home from the park, a small dog was running free from the confines of his leash. His teen charge was frantically calling for the dog to stop and return to the safety of his owner's arms.

To no avail, the dog ran into the street. So small, right at dusk, across four lanes of busy city traffic, this dog was hard to see and in obvious danger. I was crossing the road, just in time to attempt to join the boy in, either stopping traffic or scooping the dog into safety.

It was a perfect storm for the fight or flight instinct to erupt in all who were watching the scene unfold. Though brief, this moment mattered to those involved. With everything okay, the dog safely in his owner's arms and traffic moving forward, I walked home. As I walked, I was overcome with emotion with

the parallels that this situation had with my maternal experiences these past few years.

Like the boy, I have had to watch from the side of the road as my children walked into the dangers of life moving quickly.

Like the cars driving by, I have let my own forward movement come to a screeching halt in order to help bring my children to a safe place in my arms.

I have walked into the middle of uncertain territory to meet my children where they were, hoping to scoop them up and guide them back to the safe paths of known and familiar.

As I have reflected back on this situation, I identified one more similarity between the dog, the boy, the traffic, and my lived experience with my self-concept and identity...

I do not yet know how the story ends.

As I begin the analysis and summary chapter for this study, I confess to an overarching feeling of raw nakedness and self-doubt that surpasses that which I have felt before. It is a feeling that lingers in my office, lightly laden with the heavy burden of validity and rigor that this chapter may require.

Validity that, by giving voice to my lived experience, I will inspire future researchers to look beyond the quantitative and qualitative, looking deep into the story of how identity is experienced and explored. Looking deep into how identity is, sometimes, disrupted.

Validity in that my experience was more than that of a tired housewife who found herself inadequate and ill-adept at managing her household, her family, and her selfhood.

And rigor in demonstrating that this work matters because I know I am not the only wife, woman, mother, daughter, friend, aunt, or neighbor who has gone into the fiery pits of hell to meet the expectations of social milieu to tend to, care for, and save her family only to lose herself along the way.

I feel the vastness of the gap in the current literature and know that it is imperative that this gap be filled. It is with this gap in mind that I opened my journals, dug in deep, and gave my best. It is now my hope that my commitment and diligence to the research will be deemed acceptable. Dare I claim that I feel the desire that the value of this work matches or exceeds the cost of vulnerability that this work exacted.

As I begin this chapter, it is not lost on me that, despite my surety that I gave my best effort and I committed myself to both the research and the data, I have a lingering whisper in the back of my mind that it may still prove not enough.

Autoethnography, yet again, proves to be so much like my maternal journey.

So much like my experience of self.

### **A Journey into the Margins**

My journey in, and through, this autoethnography was neither linear nor predictable. Despite my greatest urges to diligently plan my writing schedule and meet impressive working hours, I was at the mercy of my heart for most of this process. Disentangling from hegemonic narratives proved to be a practice that required daily grace, sensitivity, and time. Adding complication to my journey was the reality that my

personal identity and my felt sense of maternal self were still experiencing aftershocks of neglected emotions and beliefs systems conflicts from the events of the past 5–6 years. Though I had taken on the roles of both research and researcher, I was still actively engaged in the roles of mother, wife, student, and teacher. At some point in this journey, I self-isolated and allowed my roles as friend, neighbor, and colleague to hibernate for a season.

And, lest I forget to mention, throughout this study, I have been entrenched in self-discovery and identity re-consideration as I attempt to make logical and emotional sense of who I am outside of each and every one of those roles.

Autoethnography, as a methodology, was born from the need to create an empirical space for the marginalized voices that are silenced by cultural or societal narratives; voices often lost through traditional qualitative and quantitative studies (Adams et al., 2017; Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Tolich, 2010). I have had many late-night arguments with myself about whether or not I have the right to raise the voice of my lived experience as a sounding board for the marginalized. In most ways, the social and cultural narrative might consider my life journey as close to the scripted mommy milieu as possible.

I am white.

I am middle aged.

I am married with children.

I consider myself well-educated.

I was afforded stay-at-home opportunities.

My husband's tax bracket considers me middle class.

### **Outside of the Script**

Yet, try as I might, I have found it difficult to find the shattered experience of my sense of self and identity in the literature. The well-being outcomes of my children do not fit the prescribed outcomes of my social narrative or my religious teachings. My mid-stage motherhood journey has been far from the ideal. And my sense of self and identity is far from rooted in the norms of my storyline. As I was making notes to myself, in the margins of my journal, I realized that I often use the margins to add little side thoughts, tangents, or random a-has. The messiest notes in my notebooks and journals are, almost always, the most important details; insights that pop into my mind and that I do not want to forget. These are the phone numbers, the last-minute appointments, the images that I doodle, and the words that strike my heart suddenly with special meaning.

And so it is with autoethnography. As I considered all of the notes written in the margins of my notebooks, calendars, and journals, I came to see all of the many elements of my lived experience that fall outside of the scripted narrative made television famous by June, Carol, Donna, and Margaret (Moy, 2000; Pederson, 2016). Perhaps these words, images, thoughts, and doodles that might be missing from traditional data collection have valuable insight that can elevate family life education and reverse problematic cultural trends and social scripts (Ettorre, 2017; O'Reily, 2019; Tasker & Delvoe, 2015). Perhaps the stories and narratives that linger in the essence of the essence of lifeworld experience are the very side thoughts, tangents, or random a-has that we, as family scientists, do not want to forget.

I began considering phenomenology as my methodology when I could not find a quantitative measure that would get to the heart of my research questions. I began considering autoethnography as my methodology when I could not find the shared language to issue a call for participants. I couraged into my journals when I realized that, maybe, the best way to give voice to a woman's lived experience with self-concept and identity was to, first, find the voice of my lived experience of self-concept and identity.

And, so, here I am.

With you.

Together prepared to explore the shifts in perspective and insights that emerged from the research questions for this study, the current literature, and the implications of the gaps in the existing empirical dialog.

### **Middle-Stage Motherhood**

Though motherhood is often discussed as a catalyst for identity exploration for women, the literature on middle-stage maternal identity remains relatively unexplored. Riddled with shame, social blame, and self-prescribed guilt, the pervasive social narrative assigns an ideology to the maternal role that seeps into an individual's concept of self and identity. Unique and lacking one clear definition for the phenomenon to be explored, it has become apparent that the lived experience of identity for middle stage mothers requires an introduction to the very essence of this multifaceted and complex phenomenon.

The experience of identity for an individual within the maternal role is nuanced, often domain specific, and critically intertwined with the well-being of her children

(Benjamin et al., 2019; Brousseau et al., 2020; Kolbuck et al., 2019). Social milieus and stigma can complicate the concept of self and identity making it difficult to distinguish between one's sense of self and one's appraisal of self within the maternal role (Benjamin et al., 2019; Manor-Binyamini & Nator, 2016; Sheldon et al., 2018). The lived experience of self for the middle-stage mother can become a complex amalgamation of roles, narratives, and an ever-ambiguous sense of negative appraisals for the mother of adolescent children whose identity-seeking stage includes distressed or discrepant lived experience.

Phenomenologists have long discussed identity as, both a subjective and an objective relationship between self and other (Epstein, 1973; Hardy et al., 2017). Central to the experience of one's felt sense of identity is the roles, goals, and values associated with various aspects of relational domains considered critical or of high importance to the individual (Cyr et al., 2015; Hardy et al., 2017; Praherso et al., 2017). Philosophical, at its root, auto (self) ethno (culture) graphy (study) is an empirical exploration of self in relation to one's lifeworld; a proprium and paradigm of the concept of self (Epstein, 1973; Ettore, 2017).

### **Seismic and Subtle Shifts**

As my children were grappling with their identity exploration, there were aspects of my own identity that were disheveled as I questioned, confronted, and wrestled with my own beliefs about self, identity, and proximal community more than I ever had. The changes, challenges, and experiences of motherhood through the distressed life events of my children had a ripple effect on my personal relationships within my home and

community. Eventually, the ripple effect of these changes, challenges, and experiences led to a significant change in my relationship with myself.

As I interacted with the artifacts for this study and engaged in daily self-reflection, I identified four overarching themes that represent a myriad of subtle nuggets of insight and awareness. Each nugget aligned with the purpose and intent of this study to give voice to the phenomenon of a woman's lived experience of selfhood when framed within cultural and societal hegemonic ideologies, expectations, and public appraisals. Sometimes seismic and sometimes subtle, these a-ha moments were like breadcrumbs left from my past self for my present self. Breadcrumbs that, I hope, will guide my vision towards the re-appraised future self of who I might become.

### **Seismic Shift: Identity Disrupted**

The challenges, changes, and life experiences of the previous 5 years had been emotionally heavy and laden with parent stress. However, the pace with which I had been moving to support my children in crisis and distress had blurred my ability to see outside of motherhood and into my own lived experience with chronic stress, fear, and lost sense of self. The vigilant attention on my family, as required by my roles as mother, homemaker, and wife had narrowed my view, blinding me from an image of who I am outside of the four walls of my home. I had harnessed a superpower, a laser sharp focus for identifying my children's needs and fostering positive well-being outcomes for my children. And, in the process, I had lost sight of a healthy relationship with my own sense of self, fulfillment, and life satisfaction.

There was no one life event that catapulted me outside of my felt sense of self. Rather it was the culmination of multiple life experiences and an inability to recenter my own sense of self before the next event occurred. As a formative construct of self, maternal identity may be understood as a socio-cognitive process developed through exploration, evaluation, social expectations, and meaning making (Luyckx et al., 2016; Moretti & Higgins, 1999; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Initiated by chronic daily hassles, significant life events, and her own child's development, maternal identity may undergo multiple cycles of re-evaluation and exploration of core beliefs, values, priorities, and life practices (Fossas, 2019; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Luyckx et al., 2016).

Beyond the daily hassles and normative transitions that are often associated with middle-stage motherhood, my children were experiencing non-normative and discrepant identity exploration that included cultural beliefs reappraisals, gender identity, self-harming, social anxiety, and multiple layers of sexual abuse. In one way or another, each one of these events had an impact on my sense of self as a mother and, therefore, my sense of self as an individual. Significant life events that lead to distress or trauma often result in an inner questioning of one's felt sense of belonging to self and to relational others (Luyckx et al., 2016; Marin & Shkreli, 2019). When these events result in a silencing of oneself within their lifeworld experience, a sense of increased distress and passive dwelling can freeze the individual in an emotional narrative that halts the transformational power of hope led cognitions and meaning making (Delker et al., 2020; Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015).

For me, this losing of self included a significant loss to the relationships and beliefs that had, once, been sources of great strength. Nested within societal, cultural, familial, and personal environments, maternal identity is constructed during one of the most weighty of developmental stages where responsibilities are heavy and the stakes are high (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Stanley & Stanley, 2017). Bidirectional, concurrent, and continuous maternal well-being is deeply entwined with the development and well-being outcomes of a mother's children, the adaptive identity exploration of her adolescent, and the transformational process of a family's adverse life experiences (Hein et al., 2018; Wills & Petrakis, 2018; Zucker et al., 2014). The further away from my social and cultural sense of self, the more isolated and alone I felt.

***Subtle Shift: Mommy Milieu***

My vision for middle-stage life had always included academia and some sort of a professional career. I had left college when my first child was born and worked so that my husband could finish his degree. My plan was to postpone my academic and professional pursuits until my youngest child was in school. A variety of life circumstances, including a mommy shame and guilt, delayed my return to school until my youngest child was nearing middle school. With this 5-year delayed re-entry to school, my children were older than I had originally planned; each one of them at various stages of their adolescent exploration stage by the time I enrolled in my master's degree program.

My husband was already firmly established in his career and in his professional lifestyle habits. Though he was supportive of my return to school, the bulk of the

household management and responsibilities remained mine. My children were all active and engaged in school and extra-curricular activities and I was committed to volunteer and support every organization with which they were involved. One entry in my journal reminded me that, at one point, I had 21 different roles outside of my roles of mom, wife, and student. And, true to the hegemonic ideology, I succumbed to the inescapable mandate that I keep trying to do it all when I returned to school full-time (Henderson et al., 2016; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020). I was spread too thin and moving too fast to realize that my sense of self was falling prey to the expectations of others, the demands of my community, and the pervasive narratives of the ideal and all-to-important role of mother (DeGroot & Vic, 2020; Henderson et al., 2016; Li et al., 2019). As my outer landscape appeared to be organized and in control, my inner sense of self was falling through the gaps of felt discrepancy as I was, quickly, losing sight of my desired and hoped for self (Bettle et al., 2009; Ciciolla et al., 2014; Hendeson et al., 2016; Meca et al., 2020).

The cacophonous roar that I should be able to do it all and be it all for everyone was rapturous beyond measure (Adams, 2015; Ciciolla et al., 2014; DeGroot & Vic, 2020). Rapturous and, yet so deafening that I could not actually hear it. Role renegotiation and organizing support systems proved more stressful than keeping up with all of the household and community responsibilities and expressing my overwhelm became more frustrating than holding it all together (DeGroot & Vic, 2020; Henderson et al., 2016; Liss et al., 2013; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Rizzo et al., 2013; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

I have considered this fine line detail often. Had I returned earlier, before the identity exploration stage, would we have struggled so much? Had I waited to return to school until after all of my children had launched, would things be different? Had I just been happy with my stay-at-home mom life, would the challenges that my children experienced been avoided? It bears attention that, after all of my study and research, I still ask myself these questions that are rooted in the shame and guilt milieu (Hein et al., 2018; Li et al., 2019; Liss et al., 2013).

### **Seismic Shift: Maternal Guilt and Shame**

The most significant, pervasive, and secreted theme that emerged from the data was the depth of maternal shame and guilt that I felt as I explored my role and responsibility in the identity explorations of my adolescent children. The more discrepant their experiences were from the prescribed norms of my social and religious communities, the more secret my shame and self-blame became. The more stigmatized the discrepancy of my children's experience, the more self-monitoring I practiced in an effort to protect their privacy and prevent unwarranted social judgement or rejection.

Not only did I recapitulate my private feelings of self-ascribed guilt and blame for the challenges and struggles of these years, but I also assigned myself a significant layer of shame and guilt for feeling the way that I did. At the time, I was unable to truly understand the impact that my children's discrepant identity exploration had on my own sense of self, my sense of identity, and my sense of emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Perhaps the most difficult of the journal entries to re-read were those that discussed the felt-sense of shame that resulted in a mommy martyrdom; a mommy

martyrdom that proved only to exacerbate a decrease in my self-care and an increase in my self-monitoring.

The high expectations and standards of the myth of the ideal mother may result in poor parental adjustment, impaired coping skills, diminished decision-making skills, and a role overload that compromises the overall life satisfaction and psychological well-being of mom (Balaji et al., 2007; Henderson et. al, 2016; Liss et. al, 2013; Padoa et al., 2018). Plagued with worry over the emotional, physical, and social well-being of her children and prone to ruminate over perceived parental-lack, the mommy myth may lead to a parental over-striving that results in fatigue, maternal burnout, fear of social rejection, and pervasive guilt and shame (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Liss et al., 2013; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016).

### ***Subtle Shift: Not Myself***

Perhaps the finding that surprised me the most was that I had been unable to identify the signs of emotional exhaustion and caregiving fatigue. As a yoga teacher with trauma-informed yoga therapy training, I have skills and resources to identify and tend to the many aspects of stress related mental, emotional, and physical illnesses. I confess that I have struggled to read back through all of the journal entries that make mention of my feeling emotional, sick, exhausted, and depleted (Henderson et al., 2016; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). I have been vigilant with my self-care, health, and wellness habits for the entirety of my adult life and, still, I failed to recognize how the chronic stress in my heart and home was impacting my quality of life (Lamar et al., 2019; Luthar, 2015; Meca et al., 2020).

Like a toddler in tantrum, my journal entries reflect the cries of a person who needed to rest and recover from a long and taxing day. Caught in a vicious cycle of role overload, compassion fatigue, stress contagion, and a pervasive hustle to keep moving forward, I was unable to identify the decreasing life satisfaction and sense of self-efficacy that led to chronic sorrow and emotional outbursts led by rage and resentment (Henderson et al., 2016; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

Autoethnography offers an insider's perspective on the inner workings of lived experiences that are often not accessible via alternative research methods. Purposed to disrupt norms and break through the silent nuances of social inequities and critical social stories, an autoethnography is intended to spark meaningful conversations and create meaningful change (Jones et al., 2016). I had no idea that the most significant norm disruption that would come from this work would be the broken silences that were coming from deep within myself. As a result of identifying such deeply rooted shame and guilt narratives, I have implemented a new habit to my journal writing routine. Historically, I have avoided any practice that involved reading and reviewing my journals on a consistent basis. In identifying the pervasive, and chronic, patterns of fatigue, burnout, and compromised wellness, I have started a monthly reflection on my journals. This new practice has been vital to my help-seeking and sense of efficacy in choosing alternative ways to manage my roles, responsibilities, and nourishment of my own self-care.

### **Seismic Shift: Religious Self**

As I have considered my experiences as a mother and the artifacts for this study, I have considered Kuhn's (1996) concept of the paradigm shift. As a result of some of the most intimate details of my children's lived experience with identity, it became imperative that I re-consider the social and cultural narratives prescribed by our family's religious beliefs. My belief systems were challenged, eventually progressing into something new through an evolution driven by drift, crisis, and relational conflict (Grubbs et al., 2018; Kuhn, 1996). When adolescent distress and trauma presented in our home, I found that my self-efficacy and personal sense of well-being relied on the flexibility to evolve out from underneath old ways of being and believing in order to find a new way of doing family and honoring our home environment.

This evolving required an unlearning that came at a significant cost to my well-being, my sense of identity, my marital relationship, and my sense of belonging to my future. Ascribing norms and social expectations to believers, many religious institutions define characteristics of the ideal through beliefs and socio-cultural narratives (Bornstein et al., 2017; Krause et al., 2019; Yilmaz, 2019). Religious individuals and families that have prescribed to, and experienced, harmonious home environments are often ill-equipped to navigate the sudden dysfunctional aspects of family life when distress, trauma, or non-normative transitions disrupt the home and family (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016; Hardy et al., 2017; Mahoney, 2010; Stauner et al., 2019).

I grew up in a church where attendance was discussed among clergy leaders as people who were active "salt of the earth" members or less active; a church that used

words like worthy, Christlike, and divine to determine a moral code of ethics, personal strength, and life happiness. For as long as I can remember, I was shown the ideal model and framework for home and family life. I was given the script for the one way to be, believe, and become that would find me on the right side of acceptable, honorable, and worthy to man and God (Bornstein et al., 2017; Grubbs et al., 2018; Mahoney et al., 2021). For a long time, a really long time, I played the part and I forged forward into the roles of stay-at-home mom, housewife, and faithful servant of religious and community organizations. When my children's identity exploration involved foundational beliefs, choices, and experiences that were outside of our traditional religious narrative, I found that my ability to subscribe to the norms and beliefs came into question. I believe it was a slow process; like a snowball picking up speed as our family experiences were layered one on top of another.

***2017, November 1: Journal***

I felt an intense strike to my gut today as I recalled a conversation that I had had with KLeP a few years ago. We have talked about it many times, but I just can't seem to forgive myself for saying the wrong words when I knew the right words. It makes me sick to keep thinking that holding on to church and family traditions was hurting more than it was helping.

Overtime, I found it more difficult to hear the same messages of faith, obedience, and earned worth without feeling the weight of shame and imperfection weigh heavy on my sense of self. My religious and social anxieties increased as I emotionally and mentally contended with the dogma of religious hope as I recognized how little of the

hope-led components of goals, agency, and pathways are missing when a person is worried about worthiness, clergy approval, and eternal damnation (Grubbs et al., 2018; Hisham et al., 2016; Stauner et al., 2019).

***2019, July 12: Journal***

It has been two Sunday's in a row that I feel like I can barely breathe when I enter the chapel. It feels so frustrating to know that I have followed all the rules and done all the things and after all these years, I still don't belong. I feel a sense of betrayal and a deep layer of regret that the one place that I used to go for refuge and peace is now the greatest source of my emotional, spiritual, and mental pain. I have been a part of this community for 30+ years. I have been hustling to fit in since I was a little girl. But, after all these years, my story still doesn't match the guidelines for good enough.

It was a short time after I wrote the above journal entry that I started having a visceral reaction to the church building. What had started out as quiet contemplation of the indoctrinated and rigid beliefs became a chronic case of full-blown panic attacks and hyperventilation when I entered the building. I had never entertained the idea that I had a choice on religious beliefs and behaviors, but when my own children started struggling with a sense of discrepant identity, I felt a deep desire to listen carefully to the cultural milieu that, now, felt more harmful than good.

***2021, July 16: Reflection***

We had built this thing and we had followed a script and it worked for quite some time. Things followed their appropriate timeline; kids got jobs and drivers'

licenses, they graduated from high school, and they went to college. There were highs and lows, but the ‘script’ made sense and the system recovered when challenges and obstacles arose on the path. We had something that we could call our North, so we had something with which to orient our compass. This allowed us to stay on course of the goals that had been created for raising kids and building a home.

And then this big thing happened. And another thing happened, and that pattern repeated several times over the course of a few months. We hadn’t learned about secondary impact, didn’t know about the ripple effect of trauma so we followed our normal trajectory, never realizing that the goals no longer applied to the system as a whole. It took some time and the wounds got bigger and the hits got more intense, and we still didn’t have a course correction system in place. But now we no longer had a shared North with which to rely on to help us find our way home.

As a family progresses through ages and stages of life experience, it may become necessary to adapt to new ways of being, believing, and perceiving family, life, and relationships. When hassles, hardships, and traumas impact one family member, there is a ripple effect where each family member may face an upheaval of security and a shattered sense of reality and identity (Brown et al., 2018; Doucet & Rovers, 2010; Swart & Apsche, 2014). An increase in internalizing symptoms may occur when significant life events and non-normative transitions distance an individual from the beliefs, coping skills, and social resources that are perceived as no longer accessible to support and

sustain the family in their distress (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2017; Yilmaz, 2019).

***Subtle Shift: Master Narrative***

Consistent throughout my journal entries was evidence of the master narrative of my faith and chronic positivity. Surprisingly my children are rarely named in my journaled entries and the significant events are, alarmingly, non-existent. Another series of questions arise from my failure to disclose, not only to my friends and family, but to myself the moments in life that were having a significant impact on my sense of self and familial well-being:

If I could not sit with my own sorrow, overwhelm, and self-doubt, how could I have expressed these experiences to someone else? If I was unable to be honest with myself, in the recesses of my private diaries, would I have been forthright with a friend? A therapist? A sister, parent, spouse, or neighbor? Would I have been honest on a research measure? In a research interview?

The essence of the essence of my lived experience was being silenced by the master-refrained narratives of looking on the bright side and be grateful (Delker et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2015; Welch et al., 2020). So immersed in thoughts that everything will work out, God has a plan, and there is a greater purpose to our suffering that I failed to offer myself the grace filled, hope-led cognitions that might have fostered adaptive well-being and help seeking (Small & Metler, 2020; Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015; Welch et al., 2020)

Across the lifespan, one's anticipated future is filled with a bright vision of memorable moments and milestones. Many religious individuals subscribe to a sanctified vision of their future self, co-creating their desired selves with God and their religious community; trusting in the faith of good things happen to good people and God watches over His elect and obedient (Bauman & Braddick, 2016; Grubbs et al., 2018; Mahoney et al., 2021; Stauner et al., 2019). When faced with serious situations and extreme negative emotions, religiously affiliated mothers may face an overwhelm that results in a lost sense of self and a felt sense of deficiency or failure that impairs one's present self and creates a critical chasm of one's sense of desired future self (Busseri & Merrick, 2016; Stauner et al., 2019; Yilmaz, 2019).

The experiences of my children fell so far outside of the normative for my religious community that I could not make sense of where I belonged within that community any longer. In every possible way, I had followed the prescribed narrative. When the outcomes were so far from my own sense of actual and ideal self, I struggled to continue trusting the narrative (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016; Grubbs et al., 2018; Mahoney, 2010). I could not abandon God and I could not hold to God. The result was catastrophic for my relationship with self, spouse, and religiously affiliated friends. In the face of significant life events, an accumulation of stressors, or a large number of significant life events in early age compound the result for individuals engaged in rigid religious beliefs can be detrimental to adaptive well-being, identity, coping skills, and hope-led cognitions (Hisham et al., 2016; Stauner et al., 2019). When belief systems tumble, religious identity may yield negative ruminative exploration and maladaptive outcomes that decrease one's

ability to make meaning and increase the risk of depression, anxiety, mental imbalance, and social isolation (Grubbs et al., 2018; Hardy et al., 2017; Mahoney 2010; Marin & Shkreli, 2019).

### **A Heroine's Journey**

The data and artifacts from this study reveal that the journey from my felt sense of disrupted identity through re-exploration of beliefs and into adaptive meaning making was long and arduous. I kept trying to get to the master narrative of the hero's journey, a journey filled with faith and positivity, a journey that moved from tragedy to triumph. Through the analysis, I realized that though I tried desperately to paint the illusion of bright side thinking, I was not walking the path of a hero's journey. There is no guaranteed happily ever after, cut to the credits, everything works out perfectly on the journey to one's identity.

Rather, the journey to one's sense of self and identity is paved with opportunities to grow, experiences that hone, and life lessons that are learned, taught, and felt. The journey to selfhood is a lifespan adventure. The maternal journey, at least for me, revealed itself as a heroine's journey; a journey from tragedy and trauma to trust. There were opportunities to grow into new beliefs as I released old beliefs. There were opportunities to teach my children, be taught by my children, and feel into life with my children.

In hindsight, I must agree. I find it interesting, and worth noting that this is not a journey that I kept track of, highlighting and paving for future travel. Reflecting back and had I known what was happening, I may have left some bigger breadcrumbs so that I

could create an easier path for the next obstacle I face with my sense of identity. With this study, I now know that it is not a matter of if I will re-explore my felt sense of self, but a matter of when re-consideration of my sense of self cycles again.

Maryann Williamson defined a miracle as a shift in perspective or perception (1992). My beliefs and ideology have become less black and white and more like the shapes and colors of a kaleidoscope, shapes and colors that shift and change as life experiences twist me in one direction and then another. Neither drastic nor expected, the seismic and subtle shifts in my perspective came from looking away from socially defined discrepancies and toward my intrinsically designed sense of self-belonging. To some members of my social and religious communities, it appears that I have lost my beliefs. As I ponder this, I posit that I have not lost my belief, but I have given myself permission to reframe my beliefs.

My entire system of habits, patterns, and beliefs was shaken to the core. Everything that my family had been built on was, in some way, disrupted and challenged. But, in the shake up, I was gifted the opportunity to rebuild something new, something that will be a better fit. I threw some beliefs away and I kept a lot of the foundational hope we had built on. I let go of the dreams that had never been mine and I took the time to mourn my deep sense of loss at aspects of my future that may never be.

So often, when subscribing to social and cultural narratives, there is an ascribed sense of guilt for acknowledging the aspects of our lives that do not fit the molds. Fear of rejection and a deep need to belong can be cruel captors of hope, holding hostage the goals, agency, and pathways towards self-efficacy and the lived experience of life

satisfaction. The artifacts for this research reveal that, for many years, I held firm to rigid beliefs and ideological expectations. As a result, I was often led to dig my head in the sand of positivity and blind faith. However, it was the master narrative that dictated that I think positively, do more, and have enough faith to keep moving forward that kept me ruminating on shame and guilt. For me, it was the courage to acknowledge what was no longer working for me and my family that gave me the intrinsic access to the hope-cognitions that I needed to ask for help, reach for meaning, and narrate my own story.

*2020, February 4: Journal*

The more I let go of the rigid belief systems, the closer I got to my children. The more I let go of the polarity, the more I connected with a life potential that felt bigger than I had been taught I was worthy of. I had been spoon fed an image of a God that required the perfection of my all. I was either 100% or I was nothing; the God I was given at birth was a God who would accept nothing more than Christlike.

It was not God that I felt abandoned by. It was the people who had proclaimed themselves representatives of God. It was the people who did not have space for me and my children in their congregations and chapels. It was the people who did not know how to treat people who don't fit their mold.

As I talked to Dr. D today about switching my doctoral research to the maternal experience, I felt a deep sadness as I confessed that I felt I had to choose between my God and my children. I could not see how my God, the one who had

sat with me for five years as I barely had energy to breathe, how that God could now be asking me to choose!

### **Implications**

Throughout this research, I continue to find more questions than I have answers. I continue to contend with the question that I asked myself when I first started discussing adolescent identity distress, what is mom's experience with her own identity when her adolescent child is having discrepant identity exploration experiences? I believe that I have as many questions for myself as I have for future research.

Was it the prescribed ideal of motherhood that led to my own felt sense of discrepancy?

Was it the high expectations of the rigid beliefs that were being exacted by my religious and cultural communities?

Was it the repeated and collective distress and trauma that I had experienced with my children? In my own adolescent years?

Was I, myself, in a state of chronic anxiety, depression, loneliness and fatigue? Was I mourning a life that had never been mine to vision? Was this compassion fatigue, chronic sorrow, or ambiguous loss? Was my plate too full?

Was I just, plain, and simple, a bad mom?

Yes?

No?

Maybe so?

After 6 months of sitting with this data and 6 months of dedicated reflective practices, what I do know is mostly what I did not know at the time:

1. I did not know that I was drowning under the weight of my roles and responsibilities.
2. I did not realize that the hegemonic ideals with which I adhered were keeping me tethered to the very hustle of ought-led living that was pulling me down into an abyss of do more, be more, and move faster.
3. I did not know that, without a shared language, there were no words to adequately share how I was feeling nor did those in my circle have the ability to adequately listen to my plight.
4. I did not realize that, as the load got heavier, I was giving up all of the aspects of my life that were mine; the aspects of life that made me me.
5. I did not know how heavy the emotional toll had been on me, my children, and my family.

### **The Cycle of Self-Discrepancy**

I first became acquainted with self-discrepancy theory while studying adolescent perfection-driven distress and religiosity for my master's degree. This theory was introduced as a theory of affect between two paradigms of self the ought-self and the ideal-self (Higgins, 1987). The ideal self is defined by an intrinsically motivated guide that directs the aspirations of an individual toward the pursuits of a desired self through goals, agency, and pathways (Cyr et al., 2015; Hong et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2019). Adaptive traits of the ideal-self guide throughout identity formation include positive

striving, felt-authenticity, self-compassion, flexibility, and intentional self-reflection that leads to meaning making and transformational growth (Cyr et al., 2015; Higgins, 1987). In contrast to the ideal-self guide is the paradigmatic ought-self, an extrinsically motivated guide that is defined by the expectations, belief systems, and responsibilities ascribed by significant others (Piotrowski, 2020; Praharso et al., 2017). Often maladaptive, traits associated with this guide include perfectionistic thought patterns, guarded self-presentation, comparison, shame, rigidity, and destructive rumination (Peterman et al., 2014; Praharso et al., 2017).

Beyond the adolescent years, through the lived experience of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, strengths and weaknesses, an individual is likely to meet both self-guides many times throughout their developmental journey. Fluid and dynamic, identity exploration is the delicate balance between the ought-self, the ideal-self, and one's perceived sense of actual-self. Across the lifespan social connections and hope-led cognitions buffer the highs and lows of identity formation through the perceived access to intrinsically defined goals, agency, and pathways (Ashby et al., 2011; Mathew et al., 2014; Praharso et al., 2017).

### ***Implications of the Gap***

A gap in one's concept of self, one's felt sense of identity, may occur when the prescribed social narratives are misaligned to the intrinsic goals, agency, and pathways of the individual. From traumatic experiences to lifeworld disruptions, an individual will contend with their own beliefs and assumptions many times over the lifespan (Marin & Shkreli, 2019). Well beyond the adolescent years, adaptive re-consideration of old belief

systems and secure commitment to new ways of being, believing, and becoming require a pause and reflect stage (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Cyr et al., 2015).

This pause is beneficial, a critical time period where meaning can be made and roles, beliefs, values, and expectations can be explored in the light of new information, expanded perception, or reframed priorities (Delker et al., 2020 Luyckx et al., 2016; Marin & Shkreli, 2019). Adaptive re-consideration is supported by self-reflection practices that lead to meaning making and transformational growth (Luyckx et al. 2016). Conversely, re-consideration that involves an excess of worry, doubt, and fear of social rejection is likely to result in maladaptive identity moratorium or identity diffusion (Balkaya-ince et al., 2020; Marin & Shkreli, 2019; Tedeschi & Blevins, 2015).

Unfortunately, for a time, this is where I landed.

### ***Falling Through the Gap***

When an individual has, neither access to their intrinsic ideal or their core desired future self, inner conflict may result in feelings of distress, impaired decision-making skills, and decreased coping skills (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Piotrowski, 2020; Praherso et al., 2017). Throughout adulthood, identity exploration and commitment is domain specific requiring a dance between self, roles, responsibilities, and relationships with valued others (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

Though our family had some significant life events that required immediate attention and called for a re-exploration of beliefs and family patterns, it was the secreted emotions and the silenced stories that led to the overwhelm of my felt sense of disrupted present and future self. I had been shown a vision for my family and, when I no longer fit

into that prescribed vision, I did not have the skills and tools necessary to pause and re-consider my faith, values, priorities, commitments, and, ultimately, no skills to re-consider my felt sense of self (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015; Mahoney, 2010; Meca et al., 2020). I had been offered a smorgasbord of rules, requirements, and expectations that led to the ideal narrative without considering the author of my own story. It was the weight of the stigma that kept me silent; silent to the point of self-monitoring, masking, and social isolation (Adams, 2015; Meca et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2018).

The shame of feeling angry, resentful, and afraid kept me silencing my own experience. In an effort to honor the needs and experiences of my children, I had failed to recognize my own sense of self, my own goals, agency, and pathways to a new desired future. The hegemonic narrative that persistently explained that the negative well-being outcomes of my children were a direct result of my failure kept me drowning in the hustle, myopically focused on supporting my family and maintaining the illusion that if I worked harder everything would work out.

Though empirical study and research have continued to investigate self-discrepancy, identity exploration, and transformational growth, the social milieu surrounding identity has continued to foster a narrative that identity exploration is a destination; a sense of self at which we arrive after normative life transitions. The empirical and social literature abounds with dialog about identity exploration, including distressed presentation of self throughout adolescence. Scant, however, is the empirical and social literature surrounding domain specific and adult identity exploration (Meca et al., 2020; Piotrowski 2020). And, like the final grain of sand through the hourglass, there

is a paucity of research focused on one's sense of self within the maternal role (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

### ***Into the Motherhood Gap***

An iterative process, one's concept of self is a unique construct of person-context interactions held within the associated emotion and meaning-making of life's experiences; a construct that impacts current and future cognitive and behavioral relationships in the social world (Meca et al., 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). Authored by societal narratives and socially prescribed expectations, the value of mothers invested energy, time, and resources across the lifespan is often measured by the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of her children (Henderson et al., 2016; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020). Empirical dialog on the concept of self in motherhood lies, relatively, untouched at the intersection of a plethora of analyses on adolescent identity exploration, maternal influence on children's well-being outcomes, and the identity exploration associated with becoming a mother. Despite the critical role that mothers play in children's development and the well-being outcomes of the family, scant little empirical effort has considered the role of self and affect in maternal identity and the crucial role self-discrepancy may play in maternal well-being outcomes across the lifespan.

Beyond the ideological narratives and myriad responsibilities associated with motherhood is the individual experience of constructing a sense of self-identity within the role of mother. Maternal identity can be molded and shaped by her proximal relationships within the context of challenges as conflicts merge and belief systems are navigated (Meca et al., 2020). Coined the *Mommy Mystique* today's socially prescribed

perfectionistic brand of motherhood is not only about doing more, knowing all, and striving high; it's about “the struggle to find a way through the pressure and strain and stress and worry that mothers must contend with, day in and day out... it's about how they flounder and flail and go a little bit nuts when they try to take on a level of responsibility for their families that no person should or could ever be expected to shoulder alone” (Warner, 2005, p. xv).

### ***Middle-Stage Motherhood Gap***

Today's adolescents are struggling with negative well-being outcomes in far reaching numbers and in staggering ways. Rates of adolescent depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, eating disorders, and suicide ideation are on the rise resulting in many youth who are navigating new ways of being and believing; requiring the support of mother, which can be compromised if mom is struggling or experiencing overwhelm by her caregiving role in the home and family (Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Li et al., 2019; Meca et al., 2020).

Stressful life events, such as adolescent emotional and mental distress, can be considered noxious in that they often lead to additional stressors. Research and study on women's roles in caregiving, empathy, and childrearing have long suggested that mothers are likely the primary emotional and physical caregivers in the home and family (Hein et al., 2018; Li et al., 2019; Yilmaz et al., 2019). With an increasing prevalence of adolescent trauma and distress, it is critical that scholarly considerations focus on maternal well-being in response to trauma and distress in home and family. Children are at higher risk of maladaptive outcomes to daily hassles, chronic stress, trauma, and

overwhelm when mother is mentally or emotionally fatigued (Hein et al., 2018). Decision making skills are impacted by stress, overwhelm, and fatigue. Parents are often called upon to make important decisions on behalf of their children (Small & Metler, 2020). Contagion of stress, role overload, and compassion fatigue can lead to mothers becoming distressed and anxious themselves, likely complicating the ripple effect of stressful events and non-normative transitions (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016). Caring for the identity of mother is critical, not only for maternal well-being outcomes, but for the well-being outcomes of those with whom she mothers.

### **Future Research**

More than stories, thoughts, and a recollection of events, I have come to appreciate that this work is far more than a compendium of journal entries and mommy diaries. As I have sat with, listened to, read, and re-read the thoughts and musings that comprise the data for this autoethnography, I have developed a new appreciation for the rich complexity of the tapestry of lived experience across the lifespan. Rather than felt or perceived through a singular lens of selfhood, identity salience is comprised of an infinite and ever-changing assemblage of restoring a sense of coherence between one's sense of felt self and a belonging to relational other (Sheldon et al., 2018; Stryker & Serpe, 1994).

To truly consider the depth and essence of the phenomena of identity, one must be willing to extend consideration far beyond the impact of one moment in time. Like the rivers flow, the experiences of being, believing, and becoming are dynamic, fragile, and ever-changing interaction between self and other. Held within the context of time, emotions, relationships, and circumstances one's sense of self is subjective and always

evolving as a result of lived experience, new perspectives, and relational others (Engebretsen & Bjorbaekmo, 2020; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). The holistic and honest scientific inquiry of identity must leave space for the intricacies of social and emotional context from one's past and within the individuals sense of perceived future (Zucker et al., 2014). In short, we must be prepared, in science and in society, to share the living experience of our stories (Kelas et al., 2021; Neubauer et al., 2019; Welch et al., 2020).

From 2015–2020, my maternal experience was wrought with the many fears, doubts, shames, and guilts of today's middle stage motherhood. With access to the liminal spaces and dual landscaping of my experiences of felt discrepancy between my actual self and the ought ideals of dominant motherhood milieus, it has been vital to understand the socially constructed narrators of the ideals with which I prescribed (Ettorre, 2017; Wang et al., 2015). In like manner, with intention to give voice to the pervasiveness of hegemonic milieus and give life to the stories and experiences that are often silenced by stigma, I quickly realized that it was requisite that I acknowledge the self-silencing of my own stories.

### **Filling the Gap**

Though the purpose of this research is to give voice to the lived experience of self when the maternal role includes navigating the distressed or discrepant identity-seeking of adolescent offspring, I acknowledge that, of considerable import is the lived experience of identity within various family roles. I am keenly sensitive to the reality that my spouse had an experience of felt identity that would be difficult for me to voice. As did each of my children in their own identity exploration as self or as siblings.

My experience with my own sense of selfhood within my roles as a mother, wife, student, researcher, and teacher have led me to recognize that this research merely knicks at the tip of the identity iceberg.

Some key findings of this study point to the importance of expanding future research on individual identity and well-being outcomes that foster adaptive identity exploration across the lifespan. Though parents play a critical role in coaching and supporting adaptive identity exploration for their adolescent offspring, there is very little research on the bidirectional impact of discrepant adolescent identity exploration on distressed parent identity (Kolbuck et al., 2019; Luyckx et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2016; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Future research must consider a more comprehensive investigation into parental identity, parental well-being, and the impact that caregiving has on an individual's sense of disrupted present and future self (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2016).

There is an urgent and critical need for empirically focused attention on the impacts of maternal identity distress due to trauma complicated, non-normative transitions of adolescent offspring (Luyckx et al., 2016; Meca et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2016; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; van Halen et al., 2020). The lived experience of shame and guilt can run rampant through maladaptive ruminative thoughts and distressed re-evaluation of beliefs, resulting in an increase in worry, stress, and impaired cognitive appraisals of significant life events and traumatic experiences (Alanzi, 2021; Marin & Shkreli, 2019; McDiarmid & Taku, 2017). When hegemonic ideologies dominate the maternal narrative landscape of one's sense of ought and ideal self-guides, perceptions of

discrepant actual self can result in increased feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and a sense of isolation from relational others and one's sense of achieving a desired future self (Henderson et al., 2016; Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Rizzo et al., 2013; Wills & Petrakis, 2018).

Finally, there is an alarming and significant void at the intersection of religiosity and disrupted identity across the lifespan that must be addressed. Religious and spiritual struggles often arise when an individual's lived experience falls outside of the socially prescribed narrative of the spiritually minded milieu of faithful, divine, and sanctified family life outcomes (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016; Grubbs et al., 2018; Hardy et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2021; Stauner et al., 2019). Religious and spiritually engaged individuals often seek refuge and support during times of struggle and overwhelm from religious community and spiritually led lifestyle practices.

Felt discrepancy may result in complex meaning making and social isolation when an individual's life experience falls outside of the sacred and divine ideal of religious communities and institutions (Abu-Raiya et al., 2016; Bornstein et al., 2017; Peres et al., 2018; Stauner et al., 2019). An individual's sense of future self, whether desired or undesired, is often intricately woven within one's perceived actual self in the present moment. Tightly braided with family life, religious dogma may increase maternal distress, shame, and guilt when adolescent offspring experience discrepant identity exploration (Chan et al., 2018; Stauner et al., 2019).

***2020 August: Reflection in Diarium***

I walked into the room, and I knew it was big. Something weighed heavy on the heart of this child, and it looked like she might burst. I sat in silence, as she explained to me the feelings weighing heavy on her heart.

As I sat listening, my mama heart was breaking. So many times, I wanted to interrupt her, to hug her, and tell her how much I love her. I had so many thoughts and feelings that I wanted to share, but this was a moment for her words, not mine. My role, in this moment, was to listen. To listen and make room for her to be 100% honest and 100% vulnerable with me about her uncensored feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

I cannot stop thinking about the art of hearing, hearing the stories of another.

When we hear a story, on the news or in our community, do we trust the story of lived experience? Do we make room for the narratives that people tell or are we so quick to judge? Especially with sexual assault, are we so quick to defend our own discomfort, to cast a blanket of blame and shame, that we forget to listen to the story of the hurt and harm? Do we let them tell their story as a survivor? Can we leave behind right and wrong, guilty, and innocent? Can we just hear the narrative that is being lived out in a person's mind and in a person's heart? I think there is so much value for parents who leave room for bravery and the courage to be allies rather than teachers and judges. Maybe this transcends

parenthood? I wonder if a parent's greatest responsibility is to hold space while our children figure out who they are; just walking side by side?

I did not feel brave. I did not feel strong. I did not feel like I understood. I did not feel like I had any answers or words of wisdom. And I definitely felt sick that I hadn't been able to protect her. But, in reality, in this one moment, all I had to offer this child was a listening ear, an open mind, and an unconditional place in my heart. At that moment, I felt inadequate in every way.

In the end, I can only hope that my love was enough.

### **Summary**

Even in my distress I sensed that there might be a purpose to our present upheaval; to jostle, sift, and sort things until only what was most vital would remain.

—Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & me: A marriage, monks, and a writer's life*

Family and social scientists have long been interested in a wide variety of facets and dimensions of maternal influence on health and well-being outcomes for children. From prenatal care to preschool pickup lines, empirical discussion is rich with the impact that mothers have on their children's overall development (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Rizzo et al., 2013; Wills & Petrakis, 2018). The past decade has seen an increase in studies that suggest that beyond demographics, attachment, and parenting style, maternal well-being plays a significant role in childhood developmental outcomes (Hein et al., 2018; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). And more recent research has been interested in the influence that maternal engagement has on the well-being outcomes

of adolescent offspring whose identity exploration involves discrepant lived experiences (Eaton et al., 2016; Kolbuck et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2016; Small & Metler, 2020).

Though the call has been issued, there remains a significant gap in empirical dialog about the well-being factors that are associated with motherhood across the lifespan. Scant is literature that explores the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and relational toll that supporting, nurturing, and caring for a child through the tumultuous waters of adolescence has on mid-stage maternal well-being (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015, 2016; Li et al., 2019; Meca et al., 2020). Even more scarce is research that considers the magnitude and cumulative impact that adolescent discrepant identity has on the lived experience of mid-stage maternal self and identity (Brousseau et al., 2020; Eaton et al., 2016; Fadjukoff et al., 2016; Meca et al., 2020).

Albeit alarmingly absent from the empirical research, it may be critical to address just how silent this conversation is in media and popular literature. As a young mother, I had an army of friends, neighbors, and family members with whom I could ask for help when I struggled with infant teething, toddler power struggles, and nighttime terrors. As a mid-stage mother, I rarely could find someone with whom to share the depth and breadth of my emotions, let alone the felt sense of lost identity that I was struggling with.

My mid-stage maternal experience has led me through the wading of some deep and murky waters. As a mother and as an individual, I have crawled through some dark, cold, and lonely nights; sometimes nights that were strung together into fear and self-doubt that lasted for weeks and months. I carried a deep sense of loss and self-deprecation as I climbed over and traversed through the ideologies of maternal prescribed

perfection that I could not live up to. In order to give voice to the experience of mid-stage maternal identity, I believe it is time to shed light on the criticality of better understanding the aspects of motherhood that often lay hidden in closets and are tucked behind closed doors.

### **Final Thoughts**

It took me 6 years of serendipitous journaling and a giant dose of courage and commitment to explore the intersection of my lived experience and empirical dialog. Standing on both ends of my discrepant identity rope, I had been playing tug-of-war with my religious, cultural, and social narratives. My sense of identity had been disrupted and I struggled to get out from underneath the rubble to find any remnants intact enough to rebuild.

I worked with psychologists, trauma sensitive therapists, and personal coaches. I worked with a Reiki specialist, a Shaman, and I worked with church clergy. I spoke only to a few friends about my experiences, and I spoke to no one about my festering rage, resentment, and sorrow. I had moments when I would sneak away and drive to an empty lot merely so I could scream like a wolf into my empty car.

I read scriptures.

I read books.

I read tarot

I prayed to God.

I prayed to Buddah.

I pleaded with the Universe.

And, at one point, I completely stopped praying, asking, and hoping.

I looked inward.

I looked outward.

And, some days, I completely stopped looking.

The journey in, out, and through mid-stage identity was a “hanging by the thread, holding on for dear life, letting go, letting God, and power through” type of a journey.

Within this context, I have a little bit of understanding that I did not have before.

Identity is a journey, not a destination.

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APPENDIX A

Letters from my Children

## Letters from My Children

When I first began to consider an autoethnography for my dissertation, I had anticipated that more stories would emerge from the data artifacts. There were multiple times that I was asked how my children felt about me writing an autoethnography about my identity exploration during their own identity explorative years. Though I had spoken to each one of my children about my research topic, I felt that my response to this question could only be offered as my perception of their feelings.

Somehow, this felt contrary to purpose of this work as a study on giving voice to lived experience. Rather than 'giving voice' to my children's thoughts and feelings about me engaging our personal and private experiences for the sake of this research study, I opted to ask each of my children to write their response to the following questions:

1. How do you feel / what are your thoughts about your mom's autoethnographic dissertation?
2. Is there anything that she did to help or hinder your feelings, thoughts, or reservations?

Ultimately, the data revealed very few of the private and intimate details of my children's lived experiences over this time period. However, I find that revealing my experience with identity and self-concept continues to be an intimate disclosure of the way that their identity exploration impacted my own disrupted identity and distressed sense of self.

I include the following letters, written by each of my children, to honor their voices as co-actors in the scenes and vignettes of this research. I appreciate their

willingness to trust me with their life stories. And I appreciate their willingness to trust me with the rawness of this data, to honor the intimacy of their experiences, and to navigate the journey of autoethnography with authentic vulnerability and honesty. In order to stay true to the purpose of this research, to give voice to lived experience, I have left the letters in the 'voice' and form with which they were sent to me from each of my children.

### **Letter 1**

I am incredibly proud of my mom's decision to write her dissertation as an autoethnography. There is so much power in telling your story and finding your truth. Writing her dissertation in this style took so much courage and authenticity in being vulnerable. I admire how confident she is in her journey.

My mom has been very open about writing her dissertation. She always communicated to us what part of our lives she was going to discuss and made sure we would be comfortable. She also was very open about which days she would be emotional while writing so that she could set her boundaries and we could set ours.

~KMP

### **Letter 2**

**Question:** How do you feel / what are your thoughts about your mom's autoethnographic dissertation?

**Answer:** My mom often taught us to find the upsides to challenging times, and I think about that often in my adult life. When she told me about the subject of her dissertation, I thought it sounded like a perfect fit for her mind and her experience. I'm

proud of her work, and excited to see her passion for it! I'm excited to hear her share her findings.

**Follow-up:** Is there anything that she did to help you / hinder your feelings / thoughts?

**Answer:** Not that I can tell - she was careful to share relevant facts but did nothing to prime me to give some answer or another. She answered my questions directly.

~ KJP

### **Letter 3**

Hi Mom! You can include the following in your dissertation, real name, or alias.

**Question:** How do you feel about your mom's autoethnographic dissertation?

I feel very proud of my mom for 2 reasons. First, I can imagine that it'd be hard for parents to watch their children go through an identity exploration, and yet take an approach of learning and not problem solving. Second, I am so glad that my mom pursued the science and reasoning behind this not-so-frequently-talked-about but very-frequently-experienced situation. I think her work is going to help both parents and children understand each other a little better, and hopefully begin writing a script for generations to be able to communicate effectively in the near future.

~ KLeP

### **Letter 4**

When I was first asked to read part of my mom's dissertation, I was slightly nervous about how I would be portrayed and to what extent. I read a small section that was about a time in my life that is vulnerable for me to openly share. However, after

seeing how carefully and mindfully she used her words and perspective to tell her side of the story, I had no reservations about my inclusion, both in this instance, and all others. I even told her to share more details if she felt they would be a useful addition.

There was a time when I felt upset at the fact that my mom and I had joint experiences. I wanted my stories to be mine, not hers. It took some time for me to realize that life simply doesn't work that way. I am grateful for the unity my mom and I have when it comes to my hardships and lived traumas. If it weren't for this, we would not be able to share joy, love, and adventure. We have learned together and taught each other so much. Her side of the story is equally as valid and important as mine. I am so grateful for the opportunity she has to share her knowledge with as many people as possible. I am constantly being challenged by her. To hold myself accountable, extend compassion further, and really step outside of what I know to expand my view of the world and interactions with others.

Ultimately, I am proud of my mom's courage and willingness to share her stories. I am happy to be a part of it.

~ KLaP

## **Letter 5**

I am super proud of my mom for writing this dissertation. I have seen her put so much work and effort into this and it makes me super happy for her. From what I have heard from her, she is breaking boundaries and doing something that isn't done very often, if at all. I'm very happy and proud of her.

~ KRP

## APPENDIX B

### Chocolate Chip Cookie Recipe

## Chocolate Chip Cookie Recipe

# Thick and Chewy Chocolate Chip Cookies

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2 cups plus 2 tablespoons (10 5/8 ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour  
½ teaspoon baking soda  
½ teaspoon salt  
12 tablespoons (1 ½ sticks) unsalted butter, melted and cooled until warm  
1 cup packed (7 ounces) light or dark brown sugar  
½ cup (3 ½ ounces) granulated sugar  
1 large egg plus 1 egg yolk  
2 teaspoons vanilla extract  
1-1 ½ cups semisweet chocolate chips

1. Adjust the oven racks to the upper- and lower-middle positions and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper or spray them with nonstick cooking spray.
2. Whisk the flour, baking soda, and salt together in a medium bowl; set aside.
3. Either by hand or with an electric mixer, mix the butter and sugars until thoroughly blended. Beat in the egg, yolk, and vanilla until combined. Add the dry ingredients and beat at low speed just until combined. Stir in the chips to taste.
4. Roll a scant ¼ cup of the dough into a ball. Hold the dough ball with the fingertips of both hands and pull into 2 equal halves. Rotate the halves 90 degrees and, with jagged surfaces facing up, join the halves together at their base, again forming a single ball, being careful not to smooth the dough's uneven surface. Place the formed dough balls on the prepared baking sheets, jagged surface up, spacing them 2 ½ inches apart.
5. Bake until the cookies are light golden brown, and the outer edges start to harden yet the centers are still soft and puffy, 15 to 18 minutes, rotating the baking sheets front to back and top to bottom halfway through the baking time. Cool the cookies on the sheets. Remove the cooled cookies from the baking sheets with a side metal spatula.