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Do Not Take From This Room

IS THIS A MIRROR I SEE BEFORE ME?
ADOLESCENT GIRLS USE IMAGINAL WRITING
TO RE-VISION LIFE EXPERIENCE

A Dissertation

Submitted by

CAMERON L. MARZELLI

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

LESLEY UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
Cambridge MA
May 21, 2006

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Cameron L. Marzelli

May 21, 2006

Is This a Mirror I See Before Me?

Adolescent Girls Use Imaginal Writing to Re-Vision Life Experience

This participant observer collective case study was an investigation of the ways in which an imaginal writing process might facilitate resilience in adolescent girls who had previously used writing to respond to challenging life experience. As such, it was a consideration of the human capacity to accommodate change and uncertainty. I theorized that a writing process predicated on creative choices, attentive to their own and other voices, and encouraging of varied interpretive perspectives, would be useful to adolescents as an antidote to the isolating privatization of experience that was often the result of traditional journaling practice. Formulated as an adaptation of Ira Progoff's *Intensive Journal* method in order to capitalize on the interface between creative and psychological processes, this study transpired as a recursive exchange with circumstance, environment, and other people. Therapeutic aspects of the creative process were revealed, not in the elimination of suffering but rather in a capacity to hold open the possibility of healing. In this context, I concluded that a *reflective sensibility*, defined as the capacity to tolerate ambiguity predicated on the inclusion of multiple perspectives, might serve as a network of protective factors in support of the development of resilience.

With reference to my own adolescent experience and extensive work with adolescents, I had long suspected that Herculean efforts to survive and adapt might be counter-productive. Despite outward appearances, the girls were vulnerable. In fact, prior to their participation in the study, the girls had used the writing process to impose a

temporarily comforting yet ultimately restrictive structure on the ambiguity of their lives. Instead of responding to the blank page as creative opportunity, the girls used their writing to sustain the pretense of coherent, self-sufficient identities in the face of the ambiguity inherent in challenging experiences.

As an antidote to the generalizing effect of words, the therapeutic benefit of casting experience as reflective image and in the imaginal frame of metaphor invited dialogue and the feedback inherent in dialectic relationship. Words themselves came to be seen as endowed with reflective qualities. The girls were expected to read their writing aloud throughout the process. Equally significant was the unaccustomed opportunity to participate in a creative process characterized by the freedom to follow associations and intrinsic guidance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Four years ago, on a bright spring day, I walked down Wendell Street in Cambridge Massachusetts for the first time and stood tentatively on the sidewalk looking up at the building that housed the Division of Expressive Therapies at Lesley University. I was still weak and shaky from the winter's illness that had wracked my body and soul. What propelled me forward that day was a lifelong dream of undertaking doctoral study and a newfound conviction that the time had come. I was exhilarated...and also terrified at the prospect of confronting the blank page of what lay ahead.

I had glorious company every step of the way. I would like to thank the following members of the Lesley University faculty for their generous and unflagging support and encouragement: Vivien Marcow-Speiser stood beside me during the process of completing my Doctoral Study Plan and continues to teach me how to move (again). Sharlene Cochrane shepherded a remarkable group of women, young and not-so-young alike, through a unique and invaluable learning experience in New Mexico that solidified my intent to study female silence and reclaimed voices. Shaun McNiff is a fierce guardian of the creative process who continues undaunted and always makes discovery possible. Caroline Heller was that extraordinary gift: a writing teacher who re-energized my interest in qualitative research and reminded me to be extraordinarily careful with words. Nadia Herman Colburn, a gifted poet in her own right, conducted a poetry writing seminar entitled "Aspects of Poetic Voice" in the Lesley Seminars program. For eighteen months, I gave myself the gift of Nadia's class once a week, and she taught me to take my own writing seriously for the first time. I will be forever grateful for her gentle but firm presence among us as she maintained the delicate balance between the vagaries of the creative process and the aesthetic demands of the craft. Sandy Tulipano and Gilda Resmini-Walsh make everything work; I can only hope they know how much I am grateful for their support.

To the members of my Doctoral Committee:

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to John Woodall of the Harvard University School of Medicine, Founder and Director of the Unity Project, the most creative and deeply spiritual scientist I have ever known. John, your velvet hammer kept me focused and trudging straight ahead on the path. Your compassion and commitment continue to inspire my work.

I would have been lost without Steven Cramer, Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Creative Writing Program at Lesley University, gifted poet, dedicated administrator, visionary. Steven, I hope you know how much I treasured the time you shared so generously with me; it was all about the love of words. You came to every meeting bearing gifts: books, magazine articles, references. You had an uncanny ability to sense what I needed at the moment. And I was *so* glad to discover *your* poetry!

And lastly, how do I thank a cherished teacher who has enhanced my life with her wit, charm, intellectual gifts, and dedication?

Julia Byers, Division Director of Expressive Therapies at Lesley University, mentor, guide, teacher, friend. It seems like yesterday I walked into your office that day and said I had an idea. You never looked back. Instead, you taught me how to translate that idea into reality. In your view, no challenge was too great, and I will be forever grateful for your optimism, your steadfast support, your generous heart, and your friendship. I have come this far at this time in my life because of you.

As it turned out, I was not the only one with a dream. In the last four years, I have come to know courageous, resilient women who have graced my life with their bright intelligence, wit, and tenacity. Sue Harris (now president of Quincy College) taught me that survival is an attitude: if I sat on the “correct” side of the Red Line train, I would be able to see the skyline of her beloved Boston every time I crossed the Charles River. Grace Kwan’s gentle spirit and deep reserves of courage remind all of us to persevere. Gony Halevy and Irit Halperin are the most fiercely adventurous women I know, and I was strengthened in this process by their friendship and example. The courage of Ellen Landis, pioneer woman and creative spirit, reminded me of the necessity of honoring conviction. Jessica Schwarzenbach continues to teach me how vivid life is when seen through an artist’s eyes and that process is what matters. Trina Crowley’s energy and optimism fueled my own.

I will always cherish my dear friend and beloved sister in spirit, Tammy Bar-On. We were destined to meet and keep each other company at this time in our lives. So many emails! Across the miles of continents and oceans, we have laughed and wept together. Tammy, I know you agree that we have finished what we started—together—because it was the only way to honor all we have lost...and found.

For us all, it is finally about that ineffable alchemy of blood, sweat, and tears that shapes us: family.

My brothers continue to inspire me with their undaunted vision and singular talents. I am blessed as well that their wives are my cherished friends. In that spirit, I thank Reed and Diana for their gifts during the research and writing process: “a view with a room”, so much laughter, the love of family, the comfort of shared memories. Tony and Anne brought me back to my beloved Maine; their shared courage gives me faith in a darkened world. Jordan, know that I hold you and your son Colin close to my heart. And here’s to the next generation of strong, resilient women: my treasured nieces Jennifer, Katie, Brooklin, and Serena.

Alison, Betty, and Lucy were my mother, my godmother, and my mother-in-law, respectively. Each of these women nurtured me as only she knew how. Each gave me a unique example of a fiercely independent woman who lived life on her own terms. With this work, I have tried to honor the now-silent voices that mothered me throughout my life.

I hardly knew Jack, my father, through most of my life. In the last few years we are learning together about fathers and daughters, before it is too late. Now I understand why I am insatiably curious, delight in conversation, and never seem to stop learning. I came home to write my dissertation in San Francisco, the city where I was born. My father made that happen.

As it turned out, my son Michael and I went off to school together, and now we graduate a week apart. His father and I take great pride in his accomplishments and the passion and commitment he brings to the pursuit of his dream. He may be the first of us to make a living as a writer!

DEDICATION

To my husband David:

It seems as if I have loved you for a thousand lifetimes. You are my 'rock'; all survivors have one, as Bree would say. I cannot remember a time when you were not beside me. Almost thirty years ago, on the first day of my teaching career, you were the administrator, and I shook your hand. From your example I learned to take my rank book with me during fire drills, that a sense of humor soothes the most savage adolescent beast, and that high standards tempered with compassion and respect bring out the best in people. Through the years, we have shared this sacred work. So many times, you believed in me when I doubted myself. In the course of our years together, I have discovered that grace weaves its way unerringly through a loving marriage, and a true partnership begins and ends in unselfish commitment. There was hardship along this way; you never complained. Thank you for reminding me of what matters; faith, respect, and love.

AND

To Holly, Serena, and Bree, "my girls":

Your shared your lives, your hopes, fears, and dreams with me so unselfishly. So much joy, so much sorrow, as we wended our way through a gallery of images and a torrent of words. As a witness to your courage and determination in the face of all that life is and can be, I felt, once again, the familiar blessing of the work I have done with teenagers all of my adult life. How often we said it: life is SO hard...and there are always choices.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is the office of art to be unifying, to break through conventional distinctions to the underlying common elements of the experienced world while developing individuality as the manner of seeing and expressing these elements...to do away with isolations and conflicts among the elements of our being.

The physical materials that enter into the formation of a work of art...must undergo change...it is not so generally recognized that a similar transformation takes place on the side of “inner” materials, images, observations, memories, and emotions. They are also progressively re-formed; they must be administered. This modification is the building up of a truly expressive act.

-John Dewey

I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

-Seamus Heaney

I continue to be mystified by the human capacity to accommodate change, to persist and adapt despite adversity, to summon inner resources with which to transform personal challenge and misfortune into opportunities for growth. Responses to life experience and circumstance are culturally determined; they are also wonderfully idiosyncratic.

It is February 2006. Four years ago this month (and somewhat mysteriously), I became critically ill following what should have been routine surgery. Six months later, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. In the ensuing weeks, as I sought to identify the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical underpinnings of my body’s “dis-ease,” I was not surprised to learn that many women experience gender-specific physical manifestations of their restlessness, dissatisfaction, unexpressed creativity, grief, and disappointments. It now became a question of learning to perceive and relate to a process whose movement was hidden from my capacity to understand it. I had few tools at my

disposal then and an ill-formed idea that once I came to “understand” my illnesses and “the truth” of what had happened to me, I would recover and be “healed.”

With an eye to researcher reflexivity, I also reflected on my own adolescent experience of resilience. In doing so, I clarified my personal motivation for conducting this study. I have always wondered about how some people come to be, in the words of Erik Erikson (1961), “humanly strong.” As a child and young adult, I took it for granted that I would survive whatever happened to me. In retrospect, however, I silenced my own thoughts and feelings much of the time. I was the oldest and only daughter of divorce, with an alcoholic and suicidal mother who moved her four children back and forth across the United States from California to New England. As a result, I attended thirteen schools in eleven years and lost contact with my father, a prominent public figure in California higher education. Faced with an increasingly chaotic home environment, I learned to depend on myself and rarely sought the counsel of others. Instead, it seemed important to gain approval by pleasing others. The books I read were vitally important; I borrowed identities from the characters, trying them on like costumes. Every decision I made for years and years was made with someone else’s interest and expectations in mind. All the while I became a legend in my own life. I left high school after my junior year in California to enroll at Bates College in Maine (without the diploma they refused to award despite the fact that I was ranked second in my class and had been officially accepted). The refrain: *how is it that you have made it through all of what has happened to you?* Their question...but also my own. The answer: it was less risky to become what others wanted me to be. How-and why- did that happen? I had survived, indeed...at what

cost? What emerged as well was a deeply felt affinity for the plight of adolescent girls many years later.

In fact, I began to suspect that this journey was about the process itself. I was not wrong. According to Paul Philibert O.P (1995), “words are awake during our rest and our silences, active in our reflection...effective in cooperation with others.” My doctoral work in Expressive Therapies and the consideration of therapeutic applications of the writing process have taught me to do as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke suggested and “learn to love the questions themselves.” I have been disabused of the notion, firmly entrenched from years of conventional academic training and enculturation, that the goal or outcome is “the prize.” Instead, I am learning to trust the intermodal process of *poiesis* (Levine and Levine, 1999) by which the imagination has the capacity to utilize every sensory modality in the creation of alternative possibilities of being. In the course of my work with three remarkable young women, I have had the privilege of participating in concentric and recursive processes. Each of us continues to struggle, individually and collectively, with the ambiguity inherent in life-altering events; we struggle to stay in the exchange, the dialogue, instead of forcing the work to a premature, unrealized conclusion.

The broader sweep was the “writing-as-inquiry” research process. I have also identified what I believe are instructive metaphoric correlations between the stages of the creative process as Wallas (1954) identified them (preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification), the process of alchemy (the work of the *prima materia* through the *nigredo*, *albedo* and *rubedo*) as developed in the field of imaginal psychology, and resilience, the process by which we recover from illness or respond constructively to

challenging life experience. I was inspired by striking similarities between denotative definitions of resilience that emphasized those properties of *material* that enabled it to regain its shape and structure and the alchemical process. In the latter, imaginal psychologists seek to transform the *prima materia*, “that which is everywhere, unavoidable, despicable, and out of control in our lives,” even as they recognize it will retain the “essence” of what it was at the beginning (Duff, 1993; Hillman, 1983; Bosnak, 2002).

Given my increasing interest in uniquely individual manifestations of internal suffering, I was determined to afford the girls an opportunity I never had at their age. I hoped that the writing intervention I developed with reference to Progoff’s *Intensive Journal* process would enable them to draw the present situation of their lives into a broad perspective that included both past experiences and future potentials while opening deeper contact with creative sources. Throughout the process, so-called *dimensions of experience* (Progoff, 1975) would be realized in which subjective experiences would become reflective images and “feed back” their energy in dialogic contact with each other. In this way, the remedy would reveal itself in its own language. Perhaps the girls would surrender their illusions of control and learn to attend to and “serve” the images given to them in their writing. I theorized that an imaginative process predicated on creative choices, attentive to other voices, and encouraging of varied interpretive perspectives could be useful to adolescents as an antidote to the isolating privatization of experience that was often the result of traditional journal practices. As a result, the discoveries the girls made in their writing could be understood as further evidence of “the transformational nature of human understanding...revealed in “the stream of

symbols...[that] constitutes a human mind”(Lifton, 1993, p. 28). As such, this process would transpire as a recursive exchange with circumstance, environment, and other people, a continual process of becoming. I envisioned it as an unending process of reconstituting people and objects that would become, in the words of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer “no mere receiving, no repetition of a given structure of reality but comprising a free activity of the spirit (p. 28). In this way, the therapeutic aspect of creativity (in this case, the writing process) would be revealed, not in its elimination of suffering but rather in its capacity to hold those who are open to the possibility of healing in the midst of that suffering so that they might tolerate the ambiguity and bear the chaos without denial or flight. (Levine, 1999, p. 31).

In conceptualizing this study, I rephrased Gilligan (1982): writing that represents one’s subjective experience is a reflective action of voice. Additionally, I extended Belenky et al’s (1986) initial assertion that silenced women needed to gain a voice and develop an “awareness of mind.” It was not enough to develop a voice that could be heard; the girls needed to learn how to sustain a voice that expected—and received—a response. Additionally, the word “mind” was limiting in its connotations of logic and reason (which implied certainty and “truth”). More needed to be said about other kinds of awareness, such as that derived from participation in an imaginal process, that might “break the cycle of subjugation and oppression.” Belenky et al (1986) posited the theory that immersion in a symbol system promoted the development of a capacity for “reasoned reflection.” If I emphasized the imaginal deepening and amplification of subjective experience as the anticipated result of the “de-literalizing” that occurred in an imaginal process, the prescriptiveness of logic would be lessened. Taken in this context, “reasoned

reflection” would come to mean a capacity to tolerate ambiguity predicated on the inclusion of multiple perspectives, a process that would allow for an “interrogation” of one’s subjectivity. I am still learning; perhaps the girls could “learn to love the questions” as well. In this way, the research process would promote the recognition that while the girls had a need to “make meaning” of their experience, their responses and the words they used to delineate their responses were contextual and temporal, subject to change.

I decided that the *Intensive Journal* method developed by Ira Progoff would most effectively support the objectives of this study because it had been conceptualized as a creative (writing) process in the context of imaginal psychology. Devoid of analytical theory that would demand a particular interpretation of the girls’ behavior and writing, it would allow me to emphasize the active, non-analytical quality of the work. I could (and did) direct individualized associative processes and raise specific questions that seemed relevant to each girl’s experience. I encouraged the girls to “trust the process” and be attentive, not only to the events themselves but also to their relationship to those events as it was revealed in the images that presented themselves.

In fact, the concept of relationship became central to our work. I continually emphasized a dialectical interpretation of and response to experience in which they might envision themselves continually *in relation* to the images derived from their experiences. In this way, indefinite and elusive thoughts and emotions might become accessible and “feed back” into other mini-processes, thereby building a cumulative movement that was fed into by other mini-processes as they interacted with each other (Progoff, 1975).

My primary objective was to determine **to what extent an imaginal writing process would reveal or support the development of a capacity for reflection in subjects who had been challenged by life experience and had previously used writing to respond to those experiences.** Given a number of opportunities for oral and written (imaginal) dialogue (with an inherent emphasis on the feedback resulting from the exchange), I focused specifically on their ability to engage perspectives other than their own.

Over time, it became apparent that the girls made many and varied attempts to use the writing process to impose a temporarily comforting yet ultimately restrictive structure on the ambiguity of their lives. As a result of my own adolescent experience, I already suspected that Herculean efforts to “survive and adapt” might, in fact, be counter-productive. Masten’s question (2001) became particularly relevant to this study. *What kind of internal distress do resilient youth suffer in contrast to their external competence?* In the course of my work with the girls, I came to see that what appeared to be resilience was, in fact, an act of masked fragility and “the survivor” just another role to play, leaving them still vulnerable to crisis. Therefore, I was not surprised by several findings in the literature. Some researchers concluded that resilient individuals might be more likely to experience stress-related health problems and exhibit aloofness in personal relationships (Werner & Smith, 1992). Similarly, Wolff (1995) expressed concern about optimistic definitions of resilience that stressed only behavioral success and called anxiety and depression “the price of resilience.”

In fact, despite outward appearances to the contrary, each of the girls in this study demonstrated the negative effects of what Gilligan (1982, 1993), termed the

“privatization of [female] experience” in their behavior, speech, and in their writing. Having already endured the disruption of significant relationships by the time they arrived at the critical juncture of adolescence, the girls were in the throes of the very dissociative process she identified over twenty years ago when I met them. Bree and Serena were children of divorce who lived alone with their silent, distanced fathers. Determined to maintain a façade of cheery bravado, Holly never spoke of her mother’s three-year illness to anyone; by the time her mother died (during the course of the study), she was numb. In the process of trying to maintain relationships they perceived to be crucial to their developing sense of self, each of them was coming not to know what she knew.

At the outset of the study, each of the girls reported that writing, directly or indirectly, about what had happened to them was “the most helpful thing” they did to “cope.” The adults around them agreed: writing seemed to be what Masten (2001) termed an effective “adaptive system” (p. 12). However, appearances were deceptive. Dependent as it was upon relationship (with audience actual or perceived), the writing process they turned to for support or release had, in fact, become fraught with risk. It became apparent that each of the girls had lost what Gilligan’s (1982) colleague Annie Rogers called her “ordinary courage,” the positive expectation of having a voice and being in relationship they experienced in their pre-adolescence. Instead, the girls had adopted a voice in their writing they identified as “other,” separate and detached from their public lives. Perhaps most tellingly, they did not expect a response to this voice, silenced as it was in writing that no one read or heard. Consequently, as “carriers of unvoiced desires and unrealized possibilities” (Gilligan, 1982), they were at considerable

risk for future crisis. The “lie” was still at work: they were altering their voices to accommodate relationships they perceived to be worth the sacrifice.

Instead of responding to the blank page as creative opportunity, the girls had been using their writing to sustain the pretense of coherent, self-sufficient identities in the face of the ambiguity inherent in challenging experiences. Additionally, they had convinced themselves and others (as had been suggested to them on numerous occasions) that the act of writing itself would facilitate a healthy release of emotion, thereby enabling resolution of affective impediments or “blocks.” Instead, the fixative property of words, so often appreciated for its capacity to contain and name experience, began to work against them. No one read or heard their words; therefore, no one challenged their version of themselves and their experience. The release of emotion into the void of silence became a temporary fix.

In the absence of feedback from a supportively questioning audience, their perspective became more and more exclusive and rigid. Increasingly distanced from their own feelings, they began to describe themselves as victims and abdicate responsibility for their own welfare. As did everyone around them, the girls believed that the writing they were doing was remedy enough. However, when crisis struck again, they were reactive rather than proactive, the pretense of self-reliance and resolution having been exposed for the sham it was. In the context of *crystallization theory* (Knill, et al., 1995), the girls’ resistance could be seen as an opportunity for *intermodal transfer*, an advantageous modification of the creative process in the context of Expressive Therapies that might enable them to elucidate the content coming forth using alternative materials, structures, forms or frames. For the purposes of this study, however, I

purposely restricted the process in order to focus solely on therapeutic applications (and the limitations) of writing. Similarly, as mentioned previously, I make no attempt to explain their resistance in the context of a specific developmental theory.

Given my theory that a capacity for reflection is predicated upon the ability to attend to multiple perspectives, I was determined to address the girls' inability to engage others (and their own experience) in their speaking and writing. Therefore, I formulated the following questions to direct the course of this study:

- **What happens when adolescent girls who have previously used writing to respond to challenging life experiences participate in an imaginal writing process to re-vision their subjective experience of these pivotal moments?**
- **Does the data (writings, observed and reported behaviors, interview responses) reveal an *ability to tolerate ambiguity* and *include multiple perspectives*, two traits that contribute to a capacity for reflection? Does the data reveal behaviors that might compromise or mitigate against a capacity for reflection?**

Throughout their experience with imaginal writing, several aspects of the process became significant. Not surprisingly, it was about relationship after all. During the course of the study, each of the girls was challenged by crisis, and each of them worked to reclaim her lost voice. Two of them continued to resist opportunities for written dialogue but were increasingly able to tolerate the ambiguity of these events and attend to inner guidance as well as perspectives other than their own. Perhaps given her motivation to change from the outset, the third embraced the dialogue process as an opportunity to pursue new and instructive relationships with images from her past

experience. At the conclusion of our time together, it appeared that each of them was more able to translate reflection into action and take a more proactive approach to ongoing personal issues.

The consistent expectation that they would read what they had written aloud in order to receive feedback (from themselves in the sound of their own voice and from me) was at first daunting. As time went on and the hard work progressed, these opportunities were the means by which they laboriously began to recover some ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings in relationship to an audience. Additionally, the therapeutic benefit of casting experience in the imaginal frame of metaphor, as an antidote to the generalizing effect of words, cannot be overstated. In this way, experience was reflective image, non-judgmental, all the while inviting dialogue and the feedback inherent in dialectic relationship. In the context of expecting feedback, even words themselves came to be seen as endowed with reflective qualities. In the practice of poetry therapy, this endeavor adheres to the iso-principle, in which an attempt is made to identify a metaphoric or symbolic connection between a poem and a presenting problem in order to activate a dialectic relationship. Equally important was the unaccustomed opportunity to participate in a creative process characterized by the freedom to follow associations and intrinsic guidance.

At the outset, I believe it will be useful to establish the study in the context of a general understanding of resilience and previous research related to therapeutic applications of writing which includes a consideration of relevant aspects of the creative process. In keeping with my emphasis on reflective writing, I found it increasingly appropriate to utilize the terminology of creativity, imaginal psychology and theories of

resilience interchangeably in order to explore the way in which the words themselves might reflect on or feed back to each other. I hope their juxtaposition functions metaphorically for the reader, in the way that creative innovation “makes the familiar strange” and suggests new and intriguing connections and discoveries (Gordon, 1994, p. 296).

Definition of Terms

By virtue of what qualities can the girls (and their writing) be characterized as *reflective*? In the course of this study, the word *reflection* and its derivatives were used in a number of ways. From the Latin *reflectere*, the word *reflect* is defined in the Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary as “to bend or cast back,” in terms of light, heat, and sound or “to give back a likeness or image of as a mirror does.” With reference to the *Intensive Journal* method, I sought to capitalize on the implicit suggestion of dialogue and exchange in the definition and characterized the “giving back” as feedback. *Reflection* is also defined in part as a *process of contemplation*, which was useful as an explanation of the way I encouraged the girls to use their writing as an opportunity to “consider with continued attention.”

In developing this study, I theorized that what I have come to call a *reflective sensibility* develops at the interface between psychological and creative processes. Therefore, the *capacity for reflection* can be understood as a dynamic process characterized by a number of behaviors associated with creativity, including the *ability to tolerate ambiguity* and *a willingness to include multiple perspectives*. Here, the *tolerance for ambiguity* must be cast in terms of Keats’ definition of *negative capability*

referenced to poets: one who is *capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*

Similarly, *reflection* can be understood as the *capacity to interrogate experience*, a dialogic approach to life experience as mirroring image open to fluid interpretation. In their consideration of “reasoned reflection,” Belenky et al (1986) emphasized the necessity of incorporating varied perspectives, a dialogue with many voices to break the “exclusive” silence. What they termed *constructed knowledge* might also be understood in terms of the dialogue that contributes to reflection. It began with attempts to integrate knowledge those young women felt intuitively was important with knowledge they learned from others. It was a weaving together of the strands of rational *and* emotive thought, of integrating subjective *and* objective knowing, “...letting the inside out and the outside in” (p. 134-5). Their consideration of *voice* as a metaphor that might represent feelings of isolation and connection, “an inchoate urging rather than a part of the self,” was also instructive (1986, p.16).

A dialogic approach to life experience acknowledges that the only thing certain is change. Therefore, a *capacity for reflection* seemed to depend on what Erikson (1961) termed an *intuition of the ineffable*, the ambiguous “promise of possibility” derived from one’s ability to adopt a *holistic and flexible* understanding of the relative and paradoxical nature of reality and experience. In this context, a *capacity for reflection* also takes the view that challenging life experiences perceived as turning points become opportunities to embrace ambiguity and invite intuition and creativity to be at play in the world.

Needless to say, it became important to determine what voice I, as the researcher, would adopt in the written representation of the data. I was familiar with social science

research writing that described, analyzed, and reported results. Richardson (2000), however, distinguished this conventional research process from a qualitative *writing-as-method* process, a research practice by which the writers (in this case researcher and participants) investigated how people constructed the world, themselves, and others. This extended perspective, termed *writing-as-inquiry*, was relevant to my consideration of therapeutic applications of the writing process. It was also compatible with the *arts-based research process* I would employ in this study. This approach would allow me to adopt what Lifton (1993) calls a “psychological radicalism” which emphasized that “human mentation consists of continuous creation and re-creation of images and forms” ...an unending process of reconstituting people and objects (p. 28). Such a creative process, one aspect of what Richardson (2000) called *creative analytic practice*, seemed particularly appealing. It would culminate in “evocative representations,” written products that deployed literary devices to re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses in both writer and audience.

Therefore, I must also speak of **audience**. Prior to their participation in this study, the girls had been writing about their personal experiences without “an opportunity of being heard.” The process by which they would confront their tenuous and problematic relationship with an audience would become the focal point of the study.

In fact, as I knew from my own experience, a number of behaviors associated with what I called “survival” could be “staged” for an audience. I was all too aware of the early images of resilience in my reading and the mass media that implied there was something remarkable or special about resilient children, often described by words such as *invincible* or *invulnerable*. The most elemental definitions of **resilience** referred to

properties of materials and used analogies to describe and explain human behavior in response to risk, stress, or adversity. In Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, resilience is defined as "the pliant or elastic quality of a substance; the act of rebounding or springing back after being stretched or pressed; also: the recovery of strength, spirit, and good humor." The American Heritage Dictionary defines resilience as the ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune. Numerous misconceptions about the development and appearance of resilience are still prevalent. The girls' parents, teachers, counselors, and friends were eager to assure themselves of their stability. In fact, it became apparent that the girls used the writing process to perpetuate this impression of themselves.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resilience

As I reviewed the resilience literature for this study in the context of the girls' and my own experience, I began to attend to potentially problematic terminology. It became increasingly obvious that the varied connotations of the words used to describe behaviors associated with resilience could be misappropriated. I found the theories of resilience that appeared to emphasize the importance of outcomes most troubling, primarily because they were dependent on a subjective sense of self and "control" as well as unverified assessments of "external competence." There are invaluable perspectives inherent in these perspectives; nevertheless, I remain concerned that the majority of school personnel have adopted a view of resilience that remains focused on what they believe are measurable outcomes.

For example, Garmezy (1993) and Barker (1995) maintained that resilience was manifested in the ability to "spring back" or return once again to those patterns of adaptation and competence that characterized the individual before extreme stress. This view seemed to confirm what Benard (1993) called the "self-righting nature of human development" as exemplified in the ability to recover despite exposure to risk (Werner and Smith, 1992). Other researchers concluded that resilient individuals took active steps to deal with situational and environmental challenges (Rutter, 1987, p. 323). Still others concluded that resilient individuals seemed to benefit from an internal locus of control, expressed in the belief of many survivors that they could "influence the course of their

lives, no matter what” (Randolph, 1996; Davis, 1999). Adaptive cognitive appraisal was defined as the capacity to take life’s lemons and made lemonade (Davis, 1999). Cicchetti and Rogosch (2002) concluded that adaptively functioning individuals exhibited a noteworthy coherence in the organization of their biological and psychological systems. They were capable of creating and recreating meaning under stress and demonstrated a “stubborn durability” (Moskovitz, 1983; Lifton, 1993).

Equally problematic were characterizations of resilience as an aspect of the process of self-regulation (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), once again suggestive of an outcome: the ability to maintain continuity of one’s personal narrative and a coherent sense of self following traumatic events (Borden, 1992, p. 125-38). In fact, the girls’ efforts to develop such self-protective behaviors, based almost entirely on subjective determinations, seemed to preclude a tolerance for ambiguity and the inclusion of multiple perspectives that might sustain a capacity for reflection.

Throughout my career as an educator and counselor, I had observed adolescents struggle to acquire adaptive behaviors in times of transition; most often, they became more reactive or reverted to preexisting dispositional strategies in their effort to cope with the challenge of change. Therefore, I was particularly interested in models of inquiry that directed researchers’ attention to the process of how people successfully negotiated risk, resulting in an acknowledgement of the significance of *protective factors* in the development of resilience. Of particular interest to researchers were opportunities for reorganization that occurred naturally in the many biological, psychological, and social transitions during adolescence. For example, in the context of Erikson’s (1968) stages of psychosocial development, the interdependent developmental tasks of adolescence are

defined in the context of physical maturation (including the emergence of secondary sex characteristics) and identity formation (including issues related to intimacy and autonomy). Additionally, recent research (Brownlee, 1999; Steinburg, 1999) suggests that teens' brains are not completely developed until late in adolescence; these studies suggest that the connections between neurons affecting emotional, physical and mental abilities are incomplete. However, it is recognized that teens have begun to develop advanced reasoning skills, including the ability to consider multiple options and possibilities (Hayward, et al. 1997). Adolescents also develop abstract thinking skills. Of particular interest to this study is the adolescent's developing ability to think about thinking in a process known as "meta-cognition," which allows individuals to reflect on how they feel and what they are thinking as well as how they are perceived by others (Huitt, 1997). While I do not adopt a particular theory of adolescent development here, I am necessarily attentive to the emergence of a capacity for reflection occurring as it does in the context of the girls' increasing emphasis on the significance of relationships, a potentially problematic confluence of events. Dependent as it is on the inclusion of multiple perspectives, the capacity for reflection is inevitably compromised if voices are altered or silenced for the sake of maintaining relationships.

I noted Rutter's (1987) suggestion that particular attention be paid to "key turning points" in people's lives. In her view, such turning points often developed when events that transpired were different from what the individual had generally experienced or expected to happen. "It is not enough...to say that academic success or self-efficacy are protective...We must go on to ask how those qualities developed and how they changed the life course" (Davis, 1999). Additionally, researchers concluded that significant

changes in the balance of risk and protective processes had the potential to alter the direction of developmental trajectories (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). In other words, a risk trajectory might be redirected onto an adaptive path (Rutter, 1987, p. 329).

Protection does not reside in the psychological chemistry of the moment but in ways in which individuals deal with life changes and stressful or disadvantageous circumstances. Therefore, protective factors needed to be understood as relative, contextual phenomena (Gordon & Song, 1994). Both internal and external dispositions and conditions helped people resist or ameliorate risk; they were also conditions of an individual's environment that buffered, interrupted or prevented problems from occurring. If the development of a *capacity for reflection* were viewed as a process and, at least in part, a function of the interaction with varied perspectives originating in one's environment, it would be sensible to attend to the role of what I came to call a *reflective sensibility* as one protective factor in support of resilience. I was curious to learn whether an imaginal writing process might function in this capacity at these pivotal moments in the girls' lives.

The Imaginal Writing Process

You work your way down, or not so much down as within, into the interior of the present, until finally you come to that beginning in which all things, the world and the light itself, at a word welled up into being out of their absence.

–Wendell Berry

Of particular importance to this study is a consideration of how imaginal writing may be helpful in the process of making decisions about how to respond to challenging life experience. It is, first and foremost, a process primarily facilitated through a

linguistic relationship with images. Experience becomes image and language-based expressive therapies transpire as a reciprocal exchange of words: those that embody the image and those that respond to it.

There are many ways in which the response to experience may be seen as creative. Every time an individual struggles to find form in the unfamiliar or attend to the familiar in new ways, he or she is engaging the power of innate creativity, just as the poet does. The facilitation of what James Joyce referred to as “epiphanies of the ordinary,” this unplanned aspect of the creative process, is the primary objective of therapeutic intervention just as it for the poet. In creative discovery, the essence of a situation is revealed suddenly, in a flash of recognition (McNiff, 1998). The choice to savor ambiguity and be at ease with unknowing supports the ability to improvise and creates the quality of attention that makes epiphany possible. As a result, intuitive urgings (some of which may be understood as feelings) are transformed into contrived undertakings. The creative process is used to transform experience; a ‘natural’ (or automatic) activity is undertaken as a means to a consciously entertained (non-automatic) consequence (Dewey, 1934, p. 62). In fact, creative problem solving seems to be a basic human response to experience, perhaps even a natural emergency defense and mechanism for adaptation (DeSalvo, 1999). Participation in the creative process confers legitimacy on the freedom of mind that Rich (1979) saw as necessary to the writer who questions and challenges as she experiments with alternatives.

Given my objective of establishing language as a creative medium in this study, it was necessary to acknowledge the creative properties of words, even as the art therapist knows that the unique properties of the materials themselves are significant in the

creative process. Hillman (1989) defined poetry as language art, “sensuous experience giving rise to image and language.” As such, it occupies a realm where through the mysteries of speech, the multiple forms of perception fuse, transcending every single sense, and both space and time (Richards, 1962). Poetry/writing therapists capitalize on this capacity of language to establish interactive verbal linkages between events and feelings. In this way, images convey messages about an individual’s inner state that become accessible through language and useful in determining a response to experience.

As a result of her participation in an imaginal process, the individual makes meaning of experience on interactive terms and learns that her response is endowed with images, important repositories of information. How might those images-as-repositories be recognized as resources with which to develop the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and attend to multiple perspectives? In expressive arts therapy, images are perceived as guides and helpers; therapist and client follow their leads and adopt their purposefulness (McNiff, 1998). In this way, the individual seeks experiences of creation in order to gain access to multiple perspectives and learns to refine the quality of her attention, a process that McNiff (1998) characterized as *distillation*.

I envisioned that this experience would require an immersion in language, a deepening of understanding of what is contained in words, lines, punctuation marks, and, of course, *things*. If we are to reflect on language, Heidegger (1971) demanded that we enter into dialogue, the speaking of language...within *its* speaking, not within our own, much as Jung demanded that we allow the image its own personification. Jung spoke of that hard-won “inner certainty”; I likened it to what Heidegger might call the “essential essence,” *aletheia*, the “unconcealedness of beings” (p. 65). It seemed as if these

conceptions helped reveal the nature of the meaning the girls and I were trying to make: not a fixed, limited sense of self but rather some understanding of our “essential” nature. In much the same way the process of active imagination does, Heidegger beckoned one to enter an interior space he likened to “a clearing,” where one would be guaranteed “a passage to those beings we ourselves are not and access to the being that we ourselves are” (1971, p. 53). The result would be a more accurate knowing of the *truth* as Heidegger defined it: the uncovering of one’s being, truth’s being fixed in place in the figure (1971, p. 64).

In fact, numerous examples from the art world yield analogies to the work of creating “the truth” of what it means to be a work of art...and to be human. Perhaps the particular objective of the work of expressive therapists may be most appropriately explained as such: *Art then is the becoming and happening of truth, the creative preserving of truth in the work.* (1971, p. 71) In this way, expressive therapists work with the “art” in other people, the “throwness” which is that essential characteristic of *dasein*, human being, and from the creative process emerges “facticity of being,” human being on her own responsibility. *Art as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is...*(1971, p. 72). The flexibility of this “letting happen” is the willingness to remain in the Open of the clearing and surrender the need for definition and certainty, the toleration of ambiguity.

In this way, words become what Winnicott (1989) called “transitional objects” that mediate between the writer’s inner experience and the world she inhabits. Words resist, and the writer must always push them beyond their conventional boundaries in order to serve new perspectives. Similarly, the written piece that contains and represents

the writer's new perspective can be viewed as the end result of a process that Robert Jay Lifton (1993) called "formulation," a reparative process that interprets life experience using the imagination. He conceptualizes formulation as a kind of "psychic rebuilding," the construction of certain inner forms that function as a "bridge" between inner and outer worlds, a psychological process whereby the suffering individual "returns" to the world of the living. As Lifton (1993) explained it, the act of formulation involves the discovery of patterns in experience with the purpose of enhancing one's sense of connection, symbolic integrity (here, seeing one's life as purposeful), and agency. Hawkins (2000) suggested that Lifton's psychological process of formulation parallels the creative act of reappraisal and re-vision: both require a creative decision-making process, that of finding or imposing a patterned design on occurrences.

This work with images relies on the capacity for metaphoric thinking that is built into an individual's mental capacities. According to Lifton (1993), "we live on images. As human beings, we know our bodies and our minds only through what we can imagine. To grasp our humanity, we need to structure these images into metaphors and models" (p.230). As such, metaphors come to function as heuristic devices that give meaning to experience and as dynamic constructs that actually shape and inform the experience.

Psychologists have long believed that metaphorical thinking—realizing similarities between disparate objects—underlies creativity in both artistic and scientific endeavors. Metaphors and their entailments require the cognitive skills of categorization and inference as well as a "leap" from one object to another: they unite reason and imagination (Lakoff and Johnson, 1989). The resonance of a powerful metaphor comes from its ability to activate not only cognitive and sensory networks but also affective and

motivational networks, systems necessary for understanding the significance of experience. Interestingly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1989) argue that metaphors, one of the chief cognitive structures by which we make sense of the world, are derived directly from bodily experience and capacities; the body is indispensable to the representation of abstract meaning, reason, and imagination. Some would suggest that metaphors are useful, perhaps even necessary to unite the cognitive and emotional meaning of a proposition (Flaherty, 2004, p. 230).

Similarly, and as mentioned previously, working with words allows for the possibility of reappraisal: of re-visioning and re-naming experience, a creative response to experience. DeSalvo (1999) sees this property of words as that which enables them to act as “fixer,” as in photography the chemicals stabilize images even as they offer a new interpretation of experience.

In my efforts to understand and develop a therapeutic process of responding to experience in writing, I initially thought the concept of *coherence* as a property of texts that Linde (1993) considered would be helpful. Defined as “relation and connection,” it seemed analogous to the metaphor above and to offer further confirmation of the benefit of the “fixative” properties of words. In her view, the properties of narrative, in particular, pre-supposed the connection of parts to the whole, imposed a familiar structure in which to situate the experience, and acknowledged the significance of the interactive relationship between teller and audience. The writer’s demand for coherence made itself known in the formulation of images and/or narrative and the extent to which she could fit her experience into the poem or story she told herself and others to constitute her “self.” In this way, she would accord significance and recognize that seemingly unalterable

events had become re-ordered into experience she could understand as chapters in the on-going narrative of her self.

However, I came to question the validity of subjective assessments of coherence and the use of narrative as indicators of the virtue or authenticity of the self. Mishler (1999), in his study of the way in which craft artists spoke about the significance of their creative work, concluded that coherence is "...an essentially and intractably ambiguous concept that defies any effort for formal and precise definition...too vague a concept to serve as a presupposition for explaining 'why' individuals represent their lives in particular ways" (pp. 84-5). Rather, he cautioned that it might be more productive to attend to "variability and discontinuity," given that "the arts and literature offer countless examples of ways earlier criteria of what is coherent and 'makes sense' are disrupted and replaced by new forms of representation that become understandable when we 'learn' how to see and read them" (p. 84-5). By extension, I concluded that the process by which an individual attempts to "make sense" of her experience (and establish some sense of a "coherent self") must be recognized as a possibly reactive attempt to impose structure on the perceived ambiguity of challenging experience, not necessarily evidence of what some might call "self-actualization."

Therapeutic Applications of Writing

The majority of studies of therapeutic applications of writing focus on the potential physiological and psychological benefits of emotional disclosure. While I make no such claims of causation in this study, I do acknowledge the relevance of the general finding that emotional disclosure through expressive writing about life experience leads

to an altered relationship to that experience. Additionally, it appears that a disclosure intervention that allows for the release and reappraisal of troubling emotions may be expected to relieve distress, increase the ability to cope, and reduce the stress associated with illness, thus contributing to homeostasis, the normalization of physiological processes (Pennebaker, 1993; Lepore & Smyth, 2002). The early research determined that the need for a sense of certainty and agency is central to most human beings; concomitantly, with an awareness that the world is ambiguous and unpredictable came the anxiety of not attaining completion of tasks and not understanding many events. Pennebaker (1990) found that writing about negative experiences (those that are often perceived as an interruption of life tasks) allowed for a less emotion-laden assessment of the meaning of particular events.

Related findings related to physiological changes resulting from expressive writing continue to be significant. Of interest was the conclusion that deliberately modifying one's emotional relationship to an event or memory altered the physiological response to it (Ochsner, 2001). Additionally, researchers identified different physiological changes accompanying expression or suppression of emotion and related consequences to effective immune system function and a direct relation between inhibition and autonomic arousal and between disclosure and autonomic normalization has been established (Pennebaker, 1993; Lepore & Smyth, 2002). Suppression of emotion appeared to require on-going psychological work and lead to increased sympathetic nervous system activation (Booth and Petrie, 2002). Lutgendorf and Ullrich (2002) also investigated the mechanisms by which writing about stressful or traumatic

events influenced immunity and health in an attempt to understand the interactions of psychological processes and physiological change.

Several studies that focused specifically on the psychological benefits of expressive writing are also relevant to my findings. For example, given that the experiential model of psychological processing requires that a person access the “schemas” that direct the processing of stressful or traumatic events through direct experience of an emotion-laden memory, including its physiological and affective components, Pennebaker (1990, 1993) held that “unfinished” feelings derived from traumatic events are held in part as bodily states of tension, of which a person may be unaware. In his view, coming to terms with such events would require processing on cognitive, emotional, and physical levels, thereby allowing for examination of different facets of the experience otherwise blocked from awareness. As such, the central feature in this process would be a slower and more thorough re-experiencing of the experience, a cognitive reorganization facilitated when schema activation was accompanied by new information that transgressed or is incompatible with previously existing cognitive-affective structures (Lutgendorf & Ullrich, 2002). While this process might lead to insight or a change in perspective, decreased distress, and decreased bodily tension associated with the problematic issue, there was also the prediction that psychological change (resolution and integration) and release of tension would ensue to the extent that disclosure results in affective arousal and processing of new facets of the experience (Pennebaker, 1990; Lutgendorf & Ullrich, 2002). In this way, reappraisal of significant events through writing may serve as a form of controlled, more deliberative exposure to past experience, allowing for the integration of the somatic, affective, and linguistic

components of the memory. Thus, affective arousal and depth of both cognitive and affective processing may be key process variables underlying the effects of disclosure on mental and physical health. Additionally, the extent of experiential involvement in disclosure appears to be critical for immune change. Pennebaker (1990) showed that individuals who do not confront negative experience live with it in a chronically unresolved manner that is expressed in elevated stress hormones and general decrease in the effectiveness of immune response. On the other hand, individuals who become more able to face their traumas as indicated by decreased avoidance of traumatic material over the course of the disclosure also demonstrated improved immune function (Lutgendorf & Ullrich, 2002). Additionally, social cognitive neuroscientists determined that reappraisal is effective in neutralizing negative emotions in part because it influences multiple stages of the emotion generating process (Hairi et al, 2000; Lieberman, 2000; Hairi & Bookheimer, 2001). The inhibition of emotions influences thinking abilities.

In this consideration of therapeutic applications of writing, it is necessary to confront the overwhelming appeal of narrative and clearly delineate its potential limitations. After all, it seems as if we live inside an endless network of stories. Storytelling creates an illusion that subject and object, the inner and the outer world, correspond, and that the subject's experience has meaning and is preserved from chaos. Paradoxically, it also functions as a defense against the loss of the illusion of a completed universe in which life is fair and one may stroll in relative safety. In addition, the act of committing experience to narrative form inevitably confers upon it a particular sequence of events and endows it with a significance that was probably not explicit in the original experience.

As I sought to understand problematic developments in the girls' writing, I found a study by Anderson et al (2000) particularly instructive. In their view, an individual's capacity to make meaning of experience is dependent upon being located within the story of another; we are irresistibly drawn to "suture ourselves into the subject position" that appears to give our lives structure, substance, and meaning. However, this is risky business. When we enter into another's story and become its subject, we are, from that point on, obligated to adhere to the "terms and rules" of that particular narrative. Herein lies the paradox: such subjectivity might allow one a sense of narrative meaning but that meaning is achieved only by giving up one's own being. In the process, an individual trades who she is or imagines herself to be for a role in the story of another. Consequently, the sense of the complexity of one's being is reduced, and self is compromised to the point of disappearance (in Anderson, 2000). This finding was particularly pertinent to my study: as mentioned previously, many accounts of resilience contain troubling evidence of so-called "self-compromise" in the name of survival and/or adaptation to events and circumstance, and it behooves me to attend to this inherent risk.

Postmodern Conceptions of Self

Self is a construction, a result of action and symbolization. Self is a text about how one is situated with respect to others and toward the world-- a canonical text about powers and skills and dispositions that change as one's situation changes from young to old, from one kind of setting to another. The interpretation of this text in situ by an individual is his sense of self in that situation. (Bruner 1986, p.130)

As far back as classical Greece, the earliest ideas about the healing power of words have been at odds with dominant assumptions about the healing process as one in

which the writer manages to “liberate” an “ideal” or “true” self, to express a kind of private Platonic essence (Johnson, 2000). The early Greeks viewed *all* disease as open to the curative powers of language. They discovered that written language freed the mind to construct longer trains of thought and forge abstractions, new hypothetical vantage points that yielded new insights and engendered logic as a governing (or restraining) principle. In this view, writing separated the known from the knower and it set up conditions for ‘objectivity’, the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. In the framework of Aristotelian logic, the phenomenological experience of self was distanced from others and the world—separate and autonomous. As such, the self was either capable of controlling the objects of the world or was subject to being a passive recipient.

At the same time, there were those who recognized that the kinds of abstractions and “distance” that literacy makes available may create forms of alienation that engender pathology. The healers who opposed Plato’s position attempted to preserve within literate culture certain words and experiences associated with oral culture as an antidote to the more damaging tendencies of a text-centered literate culture. This became an “orality-within-literacy” that could balance, temper, and channel the power of writing so that it became a servant of healing. For these Greeks, words could heal not because they allowed one to discover an eternal or “true” self but because they made it possible to experience the self as transformative, as an open-ended socially engaged process always available for revision (Johnson, 2000).

Additionally, the work of Antiphon is instructive in that he acknowledged--and capitalized on-- the link between mind and body. Antiphon practiced medicine as art: he played upon the tension between *nomos* (established convention or discursive position)

and *physis* (the ‘natural’, spontaneous, material dimension of the human being). He and others began to think in creative ways about the sacred proverbs, epithets, and rhymes of ancient oral culture. Antiphon’s doctrine: By means of the persuasion of the words themselves, the patient painfully and helplessly situated within his own *nomos*, succeeds in placing himself in another. Suffering was understood as a signifier that could be altered by a steady stream of a different sort of signifier—sacred songs and chants. These words-as-spirits could expunge the other signifier or alter its meaning by wrapping it in a new verbal context. In this way one could come to see the prevailing *nomos* in which one lived as capable of transformation. Antiphon’s medicine enabled one to see a social configuration as lax and experience a corresponding laxity in one’s physical body. His rhetorical performance arranged the sacred chants in order to facilitate this transformative release.

Similarly, in post-modern considerations of the healing power of language, Vygotsky (1986) indicates that speaking and writing partially dictate how we perceive the world. As Lynn Worsham (1992/1993) maintains, “The pedagogical problem in the era of the post-modern is to place emotion, which has been severed from meaning, at the disposal of meaning once again” (p. 83). Likewise, as an antidote to psychic isolation, writing serves as a kind of bridge back into an experience of community, a “material activity of hope.” (Johnson, 2000, p. 88).

The poet and artist know the crucial importance of *perspective* as it determines the outcome of the creative work. DeSalvo (1999) asks a pertinent question: *What is healing but a shift in perspective?* In a similar fashion, an individual needs to discover new ways to approach and respond to experience, to learn what Richards (1962) calls the

“art of transforming tuition into intuition” (p. 115). Johnson (2000) speculates that this may be just what Antiphon sought to supply in his sacred songs and chants, that which would help his patients replace the outworn *nomos* in which they were trapped. Both Carl Rogers (1995) and Bruner (1989) saw writing as that which enables a shift from a Platonic notion of the self and of knowledge to a pluralistic process-based sense of self and of knowledge in order to sense the alternativeness of human possibility. Both affirmed the discovery of self-as-changeable-process that is always and entirely entwined with a vast multiplicity of other selves. The detached “ideal,” therefore, comes to be seen as a source of misery, an ailment that language can heal (Johnson, 2000).

For example, Bruner (1987) made it possible to understand writing as an “ongoing subversion of totalized systems” (p. 100). Rogers (1995), like Bruner, affirmed a vision of writing as therapy descended from Antiphon: the flexibility of the self and its knowledge were the key to a healing process that must develop the means to cast off outworn selves and accept oneself as “a stream of becoming,” not a finished product. “It means that I am a fluid process, not a fixed and static entity; a flowing river of change, not a block of material, a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits” (p. 101).

The postmodern view of the process of responding to experience sees it as moving from a Platonic sense of self into an interactive and subjunctive experience of the self (and of knowledge itself). According to Herman (1992), writing can help dissolve the *idée fixe* by weaving it into an ongoing fabric of perspectives or *bricolage* (an “ad hoc assemblage of miscellaneous materials and signifying structures”) that constitute one’s

ever-changing life experience. The result is a vision of one's self as flexible, as a changeful process always involved with the larger processes of evolving social contexts.

An acceptance of this perspective enabled me to understand the self as open to change and re-generation. As such, it would have the capacity to attend to multiple and varied perspectives as it encounters and necessarily embraces that which is Other. And just how does this transformation occur? Some see it as a learning process, others as a derivative of participation in the creative process. To Carl Rogers (1995), a successful way of learning

“seems to mean letting my experience carry me on, in a direction which appears to be forward, toward goals that I can only dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current of that experience. The sensation is that of floating with a complex stream of experience, with the fascinating possibility of trying to comprehend its ever-changing complexity.”

For Bruner (1986, 1990), learning occurs via those moments of creative insight or “transgression” of the orderly categories of expectation by which the student formerly organized her identities. In Bruner's theory, writers who become inspired or “self-actualized” have enabled themselves, through writing, to enter into that which is as yet Other, unknown and mysterious. In the process they recover something of the face-to-face character of oral discourse within the written word and enter the “transgressive possibilities” that interweave themselves among the discursive limits that shape us. Similarly, Barret Mandel characterized writing as a “flight out of the familiar, a mysterious transgression into the terrain of the Other” (MacCurdy 2000, p. 373). Mandel's “flight” was predicated on the provision of a “transitional” space for transformation. In the context of such a process, *knowing how not to know* becomes a radical, even revolutionary, undertaking.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Theoretical Background

This *participant observer research process* was conducted as a *collective case study* in the context of the field of Expressive Therapies. Given my theory that the presence of specific psychological strengths might be indicative of the potential to develop a *reflective sensibility*, I devised an *imaginal writing-as-inquiry method* in order to reveal and/or support the development of these strengths, namely the capacity to attend to multiple perspectives and tolerate the ambiguity inherent in challenging life experience. Emblematic of the interface between psychological and creative processes, as such they are also understood as characteristics of a dynamic process. *Tolerance of ambiguity* (previously defined in terms of Keats' concept of *negative capability*) may also be understood as a strength associated with resilience. The *inclusion of multiple perspectives* is a strength associated with resilience, theories of creativity, and imaginal psychology.

When it came time to conceptualize a method that would serve the objectives of this research study, I acknowledged the need to identify a developmental theory that would support my attempt to understand what transpired in writing at the interface between creative and therapeutic processes. Concurrently, I determined that a method derived from the tenets of imaginal psychology was well-suited to support such a study

because it would afford me an opportunity to facilitate a creative process of *imaginal reflection* in an effort to approach the girls' experiences as images.

Johnson (1999) affirmed the necessity of a developmental approach to the practice of Expressive Therapies that is theoretically and practically congruent with my objectives. In his view, such an approach de-emphasizes the significance of conventional developmental stages and enables the therapist to focus exclusively on facilitating the development of a creative process without the inherent prescriptiveness of theory-based agendas. Instead, development is characterized as a series of creative transformations that take place in an unfolding and recursive process. As mentioned previously, in the field of Expressive Therapies this process is understood to be supported by the capacity for poiesis, a willingness to surrender, stand aside, and attend to the images that arise from within. In this view, the therapeutic power of the creative process rests not in its elimination of suffering but rather in its capacity to facilitate dwelling in the midst of that suffering in order to bear the chaos without denial or flight (Levine, 1999). For the purposes of this study, such an effort could also be conceptualized as the capacity to tolerate ambiguity. Similarly, the requisite quality of attention to experience-as-image that results in therapeutic benefit I theorize as dependent upon the capacity to include multiple perspectives. Therefore, this approach makes it possible to attend to the uniquely individual dynamics of expressiveness brought to the work by the artist/client, and the therapeutic goal is movement, transformation. I was also curious about the possibility of making a determination about whether the process contributed to the development of these strengths and this outcome.

I decided that I could accomplish these objectives through adaptation of Ira Progoff's (1975) *Intensive Journal* method because it was initially developed as a means of facilitating opportunities to experience C.G. Jung's (1953) process of *active imagination* in writing. In such a process I hoped the girls might learn to give form to (or contain) the images that arose from their experience and engage them in order to differentiate them from more tangible "conscious" experience, thereby enabling the *transcendent function*. In other words, the activation of the transcendent function through the process of active imagination would facilitate the girls' ability to see "through" or "beyond" that which had previously seemed one-dimensional from a fixed, more limited perspective. Instead, they would develop a quality of attention to previous life experience (as image) that would prove to be therapeutic.

The emphasis on *movement* was critical to this process and one of the primary reasons I chose to adapt the *Intensive Journal* method for this study. Contrary to conventional journaling practice, with the *Intensive Journal* process there is an on-going expectation that the writer will not remain "stuck." Rather it may become possible to move about more freely within oneself, open up experiences, explore them, let feelings move fluidly through memories and hopes, thereby facilitating access to affective aspects of their lives with which they had no previous contact. It was this experience with movement I was seeking as an antidote to the rigid inflexibility or inability to probe deeply and express emotional affect that is so often characteristic of conventional journal methods. Additionally, Progoff (1975) observed that participants developed a quality of sensitivity and openness to the inner unfoldment of their lives, a *reflective sensibility* that became a source of strength and confidence.

Throughout this process, so-called “dimensions of experience” (Progoff, 1975) would be realized in which subjective experiences become tangible (as text) and express their energy in dialogic contact with each other. I chose to develop an adaptation of the *Intensive Journal* process because it seeks to facilitate a larger perspective in which it becomes possible to develop new qualities of relationship with life experiences as well as a means of holding and sustaining those relationships that turn out to be beneficial to health and well-being. As a result, each participant develops interior capacities strong enough to be relied upon in meeting the trials of life. True to its origin in the field of imaginal psychology, the *Intensive Journal* process does not rely on analytical interpretation. Rather, as mentioned previously, it draws the inner process forward by raising the specific questions that seem most individually relevant.

This reappraisal and reinterpretation of experience is facilitated through many sorts of dialogue, dialectical processes that arise in the experience itself and inform it even as it is going on. The writing formulates (and brings full circle) an imaginative process that is intrinsic to the experience it creates. Language itself is a living system of endless creation, and writers who turn to language to facilitate healing and recovery necessarily learn how to confront its flexibility and its creativity.

Given my emphasis on the inclusion of multiple perspectives, I found his characterization of aspects of time as involved in dialogic interaction particularly useful. Progoff (1975) differentiated between *chronological* time, the objective sequence of events and *qualitative* time, the movement of life and time perceived from within the process of a life. In my personal experience with the method, this characterization helped me understand the particular benefit of participation in the *Intensive Journal* process.

Where there is movement, there is the possibility of transformation and growth. If time were not a fixed entity and therefore amenable to exploration and reconfiguration, then challenging past experiences (and responses to them) might also be fluid and changeable. In this way, the girls were oriented between the past and the future in the particular situations that were at issue in their lives without the burden of the “fixed and never-ending” analysis and judgment that could be tiring and non-productive.

Another invaluable aspect of this process was the opportunity for associative generation of images and affective sensations. Thoughts come and go and return in the form of image, metaphor, simile, or sensory experience, and the experience of an image might not occur in conventional “picture” form but instead might take musical, auditory, visual, or verbal form. Life experience might present itself as flowing or jumbled. The “assignment” was to respond, observe, and record, thereby making a concerted effort to attend to the images that carried a feeling of movement in the life. This effort would require a passive receptivity in order to let the cycles, rhythms, tempos of life present themselves. [note: there are obvious similarities between this process and various meditative exercises. The girls, however, had no previous experience with meditation and often commented that they found this process intriguing and “restful” from the beginning].

With reference to the tenets of imaginal psychology, Progoff (1975) relied on a number of metaphors in his depiction of the *Intensive Journal* process. For example, the Daily Log served as the foundation for the more probing writing process he termed “time stretching,” a metaphor which underscores the theme of movement and serves to emphasize the possibility of attending to events or periods of time as fluid and open to re-

vision. (The “time-stretching” process included the Period Log and Steppingstone exercises). In his view, as the writer reviewed and gathered together the material of her life history, she reached back and forward in the movement of time and came to the realization that her unique story was continuing to unfold in her present experiences. With reference to the objective of developing a capacity to include multiple perspectives, subsequent work with the Steppingstones (specific pivotal moments or “turning points” in the life trajectory) would make it possible to develop and incorporate yet another perspective on the movement of life and serve as a precursor to dialogue. The Daily and Period Log activities and the extended writing referenced to the Present Moment and Steppingstones were also adapted as elements of the didactic component of this study in order to generate material from which the girls could choose “topics” for further exploration.

The actual process I used with the girls transpired in two parts. The “pre-writing” phase consisted of a series of preparatory exercises (also conducted in writing) in which the girls became familiar with several techniques I envisioned as supportive of their work with the imaginal task, the second part of the process. The “pre-writing” process began with narrowly focused entries in the Daily Log, a time-limited “objective” record of “actual” events situated in current or very recent (familiar) chronological time. This aspect of our work most closely resembled a conventional journal in that it was to be a place in which they would “log” or record a summary of what had happened in the most recent period since the last time they had made an entry. They were to work in the Daily Log for a limited time because the intent was not to elaborate but only to record, to “collect” material to work with at a later date. The time to do this kind of writing was

purposely limited in order to capitalize on the recording aspect of conventional journal practice but also to avoid becoming ensnared in its most common pitfall/limitation: the increasingly overwhelming urge to narrate and “vent.”

Similarly, the Period Log was also situated in (familiar) chronological time. It was, however, a more expansive record of events that comprised the recent relevant past, encompassing particular situations that the girls perceived to be significant in their lives. Occasionally I directed the girls to focus on a specific Present Moment in an effort to afford them practice with increased attention to particular aspects of an experience. The Present Moment was identified as a time when their life history opened into the future and presented itself as a variety of (perhaps increasingly unfamiliar) possibilities. I encouraged them to let those possibilities express themselves in whatever form they chose. This writing about the Present Moment did not have the same stringent time limitations in order to encourage the effort to follow images and their associations more freely.

The pre-writing phase continued with the Steppingstones work, initial forays into the experience of qualitative “time-stretching.” Progoff (1975) envisioned the process of returning to work with pivotal moments in life experience as reconnection (and which I understand as re-vision); a “loosening or breaking open” might start with this phase of the process as “solid clumps” of past experience were “broken open” to the light of awareness (p. 110). Steppingstones were initially recorded in single indicative phrases, and I always reminded the girls to attend to the significance of the words they used to record these events. In fact, what was initially meant to be an instructive example of a creative approach to this exercise came to be a particularly meaningful endeavor. I

offered the girls a list of what I termed “verb statements” that Progoff (1975) included in his description of Steppingstones workshop results: “*I was born. I loved. I danced. I wept. I posed. I suffered. I was entranced. I was humiliated. I got lost. I am trying to find my way*” (pg. 111). The girls were entranced by the “poetic sound” of these phrases and came to appreciate the capacity of single action words to encapsulate the essence of events and entire periods of their lives. This was a particularly productive re-vision process: in the process of dwelling on a specific experience in order to distill it in the form of a verb statement, (a process I understand as an aspect of the capacity to tolerate ambiguity), the girls reported that they were able to “penetrate layers of protective covering” and discern more about the effect of the experience than they had previously in their own writing. The verbs that came to them were evidence of another perspective on the experience. A happy accident: I had not predicted the efficacy of this activity as a means of relying on words to re-vision experience, and I discuss these findings further in a subsequent chapter.

Given my interest in exploring the interface between creative and therapeutic processes, there remained the necessity of a pre-writing opportunity to experience dialogue as a method of exploring challenging experience, the dialectic process of establishing an inner relationship with the individuals and images that comprise significant areas of their lives. Based on his observations of creative persons at work with the therapeutic process in mind, Progoff (1975) concluded that work in what he called the qualitative *Dialogue Dimension* was necessary. He learned that some relationships (with individuals or images derived from experience) opened possibilities whose promise had not been realized. As a result, these individuals or images carried

within themselves traces of unfulfilled potentialities until they were either resolved or fulfilled. At the outset of this process, relationships were initially conceived of in human terms. More extensive work in the Dialogue Dimension made it possible for dialogic interaction to occur in many and varied ways, as the girls and I would discover.

When the time came to begin work with the imaginal writing task, each of the girls identified her own topic, some “take” on a challenging personal experience that she considered a pivotal moment in her life. This writing task was designed to invite entry into an imaginal world and encourage imaginative associations. It would necessitate a change in perspective from an Aristotelian observation of similarities (and its ultimate reduction downward to common denominators) to the study of singularity, each image an entity in itself. This process would depend on a capacity for reflection and the image would become mirror. As such, the process of reflection transmuted from witnessing a phenomenon and establishing a representation to an engagement of the resonance of the image or metaphor itself. In such a process, mental events as images did not require and could not acquire further validation by reference to external events. This work necessarily called into question the girls’ assumptions about certainty, what they believed to be certain. This was a process of “making the familiar strange.” In the “strangeness,” it might become possible to say more about what had been thought to be familiar. The imaginal process functioned as a bridge between the subjective and objective worlds, thereby facilitating access to intuitive non-verbal (subjective) experience of actual events. During this phase of the work, the participants were discouraged from conventional (objective) considerations of literary form so as not to preclude and in order to emphasize opportunities for (subjective) creativity in the imaginal process.

In the parlance of the developmental approach to creative expression referenced previously, there are multiple recursive writing-as-inquiry processes at work in this study, which together constitute what Richardson (2000) termed *creative analytic practice*. As such, the emphasis is not on the achievement of a specific goal embodied in a written product. Instead, both the writing processes *and* the writing products are privileged and understood together as an interactive method of discovery *and* analysis; both processes also support the objectives of this study. Richardson (2000) references postmodernist claims that writing is always situational, partial, and local. Similarly, the writer's Self is always present, (albeit partially because there is an on-going effort to repress parts of this Self in order to be free to write material in a variety of ways and develop a variety of perspectives). The goal is not to "get it right," but rather to "get it" differently contoured and nuanced (Richardson, 2000, p. 931). In such a process, there is an expectation that the effort of experimenting with different modes of writing (here about previous life experience) will result in expanded interpretive skills and fresh perspectives.

In this particular process, the researcher and the participants used various writing forms and re-visioned subjective experience in writing. During the re-visioning phase, the researcher and participants returned to the written representations of experience. In the parlance of imaginal psychology, we "mined" words, phrases, and forms in order to attend to perspectives, feelings, ambiguities, and choices. I hope that the resulting "evocative representations" (Richardson, 2000) invite the reader to experience the reflexive and transformative aspects of a reflective process.

In summary, I approached this study with the expectation that certain skills necessary to this work would need to be taught and developed with practice. My objective was to

facilitate opportunities for the girls to learn and experience “time stretching,” associative reflection without analysis or judgment, reading aloud from their writing, engagement of the dialectic, working in the silence, and returning to their writings for “re-vision” purposes. Another reason I chose to adapt portions of the *Intensive Journal* process for this study was its emphasis on the importance of recognizing and affirming individual differences as the work continued. This opportunity to follow a uniquely personal path of associations had been new to me when I first encountered this method and was new to the girls. In fact, the manner in which these individual differences manifested themselves would become a significant aspect of the findings.

Issues

In the process of conceptualizing a research methodology that would explore the ways in which participation in an imaginal writing process might facilitate the development of capacities that could be characterized as *reflective sensibility*, I kept returning to images and reflections arising from my extensive work with adolescents as an educator, counselor, and administrator. For the last eighteen months I have worked as a counselor in a program at a nearby high school for students who have amassed repeated disciplinary infractions. While these students often represent a predictable demographic (one that could be assumed to have more than its fair share of personal, social, and school-related problems), I became increasingly troubled by their consistent independent reports of widespread drug and alcohol use, general lethargy, and apathy (most commonly characterized as a feeling of “what’s the point?”) across the student population. In fact, the teachers, counselors, and administrators I continue to work with

as a consultant to the MA Department of Education have echoed similar urgent concerns in their own schools across the state. Additionally, it became important to reference informal anecdotal reports from the novice teachers I have supervised over the years. The majority of them cited concerns about negative student attitudes as one of the major reasons they had seriously considered or had decided to leave the profession. Additionally, there continues to be shared concern about girls in particular, most notably regarding the prevalence of eating disorders and increasing female aggression, a phenomenon recently depicted in the feature film *Mean Girls* (a painful subject for entertainment at their expense) and recently explored in numerous publications (Wolf, 1990; Robertson, 1992; Artz, 1998; Budnick and Shields, 1998; Pepler and Craig, 1999). Consequently, it was not hard to conclude that these reports indicated a general deterioration of health and well being among adolescents. Given my interest in the phenomenon of resilience, it was important to consider the possibility that today's adolescents seem less able than their predecessors to respond constructively to the increasing challenges they face.

Context/Access

This research study was conducted in a comprehensive academic-vocational-technical high school serving approximately 1400 total students in rural southeastern New England. The administration was comprised of one building principal, two assistant principals (one of whom was responsible for discipline and the other for testing and special education/personnel procedures). Student Services personnel included four certified guidance counselors, a certified school adjustment counselor, and a licensed

school psychologist. Although I have never worked in this high school, I have worked in other locations as a teacher and counselor with several of the current faculty. I have also worked with the principal and several administrators in my capacity as a consultant for the Massachusetts Department of Education.

I had discussed my research interest with the assistant principal in charge of discipline and the program administrator, both of whom recommended that I speak with the building principal about the possibility of working with students for my research study. The principal readily granted access to the building and assigned me an empty office in the Guidance Suite. I communicated regularly with the appropriate counselors and school psychologist as necessary. I obtained parental consent to participate in the study from the two students under eighteen. The other student was eighteen and able to give consent. I provided the building principal with a description of my study and a copy of the consent form (Appendix A). The counseling staff welcomed my presence; they were supportive of my endeavor and always eager to hear about my work.

Participants

The participants were three adolescent females who were juniors when the study began in the winter of 2005 and are now seniors at the high school mentioned above, scheduled to graduate in June 2006. In preliminary discussions with faculty members, I explained that I hoped to use an imaginal writing process in order to reveal or support the development of particular behaviors associated with an increased capacity for reflection.

I identified two general criteria for participation in the study. I hoped to work with adolescent girls who I had been challenged by past and/or present personal

adversity and 2) had previous experience writing about personal concerns. I began with a group of six girls; it readily became apparent that three of them had minimal experience with or affinity for the writing process. With the help of their teachers and counselors, the remaining three girls were able to outwit the vagaries of academic scheduling and course requirements and carve out a class period to work with me twice a week, one during a scheduled study hall and the other two having been released from their physical education class.

Two of the participants were referred to me by a current teacher and the third by the vice-principal. When I asked them to describe their impressions of the girls, the commentary was strikingly similar. In the words of the vice-principal, one girl was a “survivor” who had “been to hell and back” and was “moving on” with her life. In recalling past interactions with another participant, her teacher recalled thinking, after reading a piece she had written in response to an autobiographical assignment, that “there was nothing [she] couldn’t handle; she just keeps her head up and her eyes forward.” About another participant, her teacher commented that she had been concerned about “how quiet she was” at first but that “it became obvious” that she was “never in trouble, dealing with everything.” I did not conduct conventional intake interviews; instead, as will be illustrated later in the accounts of our work together, what I learned about the girls emerged from their writing and discussion over the course of the time we spent together. All three girls described their lives in two parts: “the before and after.”

Bree’s parents divorced when she was ten, and her life “was never the same after that.” She and her brother spent the next three years living with one parent and then the other during a bitter custody battle. After her mother re-married and sold the only house

she called home, a “steady diet of mixed messages” finalized Bree’s decision to move in with her father when she started high school, despite her guilt at “abandoning” a new baby brother “to her clutches.” At first she and her father, a social worker, co-existed companionably; Bree steadfastly maintained that her father had “rescued” her and her older brother. However, by the time I met her, the tiny apartment they shared was becoming increasingly crowded with the addition of her father’s new girlfriend, and both teenagers craved some element of privacy. As a result, Bree continually devised numerous excuses to avoid being home, and she and her father rarely communicated in person, preferring instead to write letters to each other. Visits to her mother’s house usually resulted in chaotic “scenes” in which Bree felt it her “duty” to take her mother to task for her “mistakes.” Consequently, Bree saw herself as “independent” of her parents and prided herself on her self-reliance. Bree’s teachers and counselor reported that she was often “argumentative” and “abrasive,” an out-spoken young woman who rarely missed an opportunity to “sound off” about how little regard she had for school and teachers. In fact, neither parent seemed capable of effecting constructive changes in her behavior.

Serena was a daughter of divorce as well, also choosing to move in with her father during her high school years because she wanted to remain in her childhood home and finish high school in familiar surroundings. She, too, had been “worried for years” by the “never-ending tug-of-war” between her parents who, while not fighting each other for custody, nevertheless took every opportunity to argue and fix blame. In the last year it had become eerily quiet in her house (with an older sister off at college), and neither she nor her father knew how to break the silence. She remained in frequent, amicable contact

with her mother who lived and worked in a neighboring town. Serena was a conscientious honors and Advanced Placement student who had already achieved acclaim as a writer in the school community. Perceived by her teachers and counselor as “sensitive and shy,” she rarely spoke in class and “kept her feelings to herself.” In the context of “overwhelming” domestic turmoil, both Bree and Serena told me they had come to the conclusion that “lousy feelings were a luxury” they couldn’t afford, let alone articulate.

Holly was the only child of parents who could not have children for years, only to conceive her as a “mistake” they appeared to appreciate. She described her mother as a “relentlessly smiling” woman who baked “killer” chocolate chip cookies, made her Halloween costume by hand every year, and volunteered in her elementary classroom. Her mother had been diagnosed with a terminal illness in Holly’s first year of high school and for the next three years, Holly told no one of the steady deterioration and impending crisis she went home to every day. Instead, she kept busy. She undertook a relentless schedule of rigorous course offerings in pursuit of top class rank, joined every organization she could fit into her schedule, and began running competitively. In her classes she was a “bright, cheerful and highly articulate” presence.

I had not met any of the participants prior to the outset of my study. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of participants.

Data Collection

I met with each participant individually in bi-weekly sixty to ninety minute sessions during their study hall and physical education class periods and for extended summer

sessions from February through December of 2005. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants to collect data regarding their subjective experience of the writing-as-inquiry process, including assessments of choices made during the writing and re-vision processes. Relevant segments of the sessions were audiotaped.

As a qualitative researcher, I recognized that my own subjectivity was always part of the process. It determined how I decided on the topics, how I interacted with participants, and how I selected frames for the interpretation of data. Therefore, I would need to repeatedly examine what I thought, felt, (and thought I knew) and how I came to think, feel, and know it. As a *reflexive* researcher, I would need to report findings as actively constructed interpretations. I would also continuously monitor how my affective responses and subjective interpretations developed in the research situation and evaluate their potential to become assets or liabilities. To this end, the following questions supported my efforts to monitor my subjectivity and situate it appropriately in the research findings:

- In what ways is my research autobiographical? How does my research topic intersect with my life? (These questions foreshadow the next one)
- Which “*subjective I's*” are engaged by my research project? Reinharz (1997) asserts that a researcher brings many “selves” into the field, the most obvious being the research-based self, the socio-cultural ‘brought’ self, and the situationally-created self. Each of these selves enters the research situation and has a distinctive voice.
- How might I make the most constructive use of my subjectivity in this project?

- How does *intersubjectivity* (relationship between researcher and researched) influence interaction and interpretation?
- How do I guard against *ethno-narcissism*?

I utilized my laptop computer to compile extensive field notes during the sessions (while they were writing) labeled “Process Journal,” “Reflexivity Journal,” and “Session Notes.” I also compiled specific notes referenced to each participant in a “Subject Journal” I maintained for each of the girls. The Process Journal contained direct quotes, summaries of the session discussions and activities, writing topics, and background context. In the Reflexivity Journal, I noted my subjective response to the participants and the content of our discussions, a process which offered me an invaluable opportunity to reflect on (and re-vision) my own experience in light of the issues that emerged from my work with the girls. The Session Notes were most often reminders of things that needed to be done. Outside of the session time I also made reflective entries in a file named “Experience Journal” in which I explored my own autobiographical experience in the context of the concept of resilience. Initially I approached the compilation of these journals as a mandate in the qualitative research endeavor. In addition to maintaining these journals, I also decided to experiment with aspects of poetic voice in an effort to approach my own experience from varied perspectives. The resulting writing-as-inquiry process was a revelatory personal journey. The girls and I wrestled repeatedly with words as we sought to probe personal experience, a process of uncovering the subterfuge of denial and avoidance that was as exhilarating as it was frustrating.

I photocopied all writings done by the students (dates, times and locations included) during the sessions and collected them in color-coded file folders. The general format of

the sessions was consistent: a brief “checking in” period, usually five to ten minutes, in which I asked the girls about what had happened in their lives since I last saw them and whether they had any pressing concerns or questions related to our work together, followed by one or several writing tasks, after which they would be invited to read aloud what they had written and then write or make verbal comments about the content and/or process.

The Process

Overview

In the first sessions with the girls, I explained the general objectives of the study, how they had been referred to me, and established the conditions of confidentiality (including an explanation of the legalities incumbent upon me as a “mandated reporter”). I was keenly aware of the need to develop sufficient rapport with each of them to support the personal nature of the writing tasks I would assign. By prior arrangement with the counselors and the school psychologist, I would be functioning in an adjunct capacity; if therapeutic concerns arose in our sessions I would notify the appropriate personnel. At that point, it was their responsibility to make provisions for more extensive therapeutic support if they deemed it necessary.

From the beginning, the most engaging aspect of the study seemed to be the girls’ shared objective of developing a collection of writings about personal responses to life experience to be shared with other adolescent girls. Each of the participants was eager to contribute to such a collection and told me on numerous occasions that, as Brec put it, “girls today need to talk more to each other because...it would really help me cope with

my problems if I could read about what other girls have gone through, that I am not alone in this.”

Several aspects of the *Intensive Journal* process became permanent fixtures of our work together. During our sessions I encouraged the girls to write in silence in order to more closely attend to the inner stirrings of personal sources of meaning and strength they might not have known they possessed, with the hope that each of them would discover that the significance of events was often revealed in the relationship she formed with them. I also encouraged the girls to write first and then read what they had written out loud to me so that the sound of their own voices would “feed back” interpretations of their experience that they had not explored previously. As I told them, throughout human history, people have been writing about their responses to the events of their lives, in their journals and diaries, alone and without an opportunity or invitation to share what they had written. I emphasized the significance of audience and sought to explore the ways reading aloud from one’s writing might “feed back” indefinite bits of thoughts and emotions and activate the energies of other subjective experiences. They also did all of their writing in longhand, initially at my direction in order to emphasize the more visceral aspects of writing, to slow the process down, and encourage reflection. As time went on, each of the girls chose to continue writing by hand.

I suggested that they might like to acquire “some kind of container” for their writing and discussed the pros and cons of several, including a binder with dividers or some kind of loose-leaf notebook, perhaps wire-bound or similar to the ones I carry and showed them, hardcover Mead composition books in varied colors. I emphasized that they were under no obligation to write outside of our session time, but it often seemed to

happen that once the writing started, it came to be more and more appealing and even helpful to make entries in the journal. Throughout the study I emphasized the habit of dating each entry and including a notation of time and location.

Pre-Writing: Time-Stretching and Dialogue

At the outset of the research study I explained that I would utilize pre-writing prompts that I hoped would be effective means of generating writing of a more “introductory, background-setting” nature. Throughout the study I would also ask the girls to write about their own individual process in order to better understand their subjective response to the experience of participating in this study. Given the situation of this study in a school setting (and in order to establish a connection between this more conventional approach to their writing and the process to come), I referenced the following concepts to structure these “process-writes”:

- Significance of form and punctuation
- Explanation of word choice
- Subjective experience of the writing process
- Role of audience and feedback

My initial objective was to develop an increased attentiveness to nuance and detail that would support their work with images derived from experience. In fact, each of these concepts became significant. The girls experimented with form, they “mined” words for connotative and denotative significance, and became increasingly mindful of the significance of the writer’s relationship to her audience, “real” or imagined.

Daily Log

From February to May 2005, the girls started their session work with a brief ten-minute entry in a Daily Log (Progoff, 1975). I likened this writing to calisthenics, a time to “warm up and open up to what is flowing through us; we will feel aches and pains throughout this process but also increasing strength and flexibility.” I encouraged the girls to work with the Daily Log as often as possible outside of our session work, hoping that the time limitation would allay any concerns about plunging deep into difficult emotional terrain and would “contain” a process that each of them knew from previous experience could take off suddenly into uncharted territory. I did not ask them to read these entries aloud.

Period Log

As we did with the Daily Log, the girls and I worked regularly with the Period Log (Progoff, 1975) in the early sessions. The Period Log was similar in format to the Daily Log. However, it took a wider view and was structured by answers to general questions. As they considered these questions, I asked them to sit “in the silence” and attempt to feel the inner movement of recent experiences without judgment. The starting point was always the present moment in time, the most recent relevant past as it moved into the present.

- *Where am I now in my life?*
- *What events mark it off?*
- *How far back does it reach?*
- *What have been the main characteristics of this recent period?*

- *Do you recall any dreams, strange or unexplainable events, inspirations, illnesses, misfortunes?*

In the process of the Period Log exercise, the girls briefly described the significant inner and outer events that came to mind when they reflected on the period and recalled its primary aspects. The same time limitations were in place as mentioned previously with reference to the Daily Log, in order to establish a non-judgmental process of selectivity and avoid extended verbalization. They did not read the Period Log entries aloud.

The Present Moment

With reference to these entries, the next step was to consider the Present Moment. There was still no “analysis” at work; these pieces were written in paragraph form and were read aloud. As it turned out, I was occasionally able to “bundle” their Period Log and Period Moment writing so that they could be completed concurrently in the fifty-minute time period in which we worked together.

The Steppingstones

The initial opportunity to engage in a reflective process in the pre-writing phase of the study involved their individual designation of significant points of movement (turning points) as “stepping stones” along the road of their lives. The essential tone of the work was undirected spontaneity. This process included the following activities:

- I instructed the girls to compose a list of no more than eight to ten unelaborated words or phrases at a sitting (for the same reasons I imposed a time limit

previously), reminding them to rely on associative selectivity, making no effort to arrange them in a chronological time sequence. Later they would be read in a chronological time sequence. The first listings might be basic life facts; later listings would become more qualitative.

- After writing the list I asked them to record whatever feelings or emotions they became aware of during the process. The Steppingstones entries were always read aloud in order to “feed back” their experience of their own existence.
- Lastly, I had each of them write a one sentence “verb statement” that would “capture the essence of what happened” for each notation on the list. I provided an example from Progoff (1975). This work with the verb statements would become particularly significant as we progressed with this writing process.

The Dialogue Process

The directions I gave the girls for their work with the Dialogue process have been adapted from Progoff (1975). In anticipation of the dialogic aspect of the imaginal task, the preliminary work in the Dialogue process was conducted with more familiar reference to an individual. I reminded the girls that, while it was important to record their subjective (emotional) responses as objectively as possible, the goal was to establish a deep quality of dialogue and avoid old patterns of communication (or non-communication) that might have jeopardized a particular relationship in the past. As Progoff (1975) put it, “when depth speaks to depth between persons, that is dialogue” (p. 169). It was therefore incumbent upon the girls to place themselves “inside the actuality” of the other person’s life as though she were participating in it from within.

- We began with the girls making a list of those individuals with whom their past, present or possible future relationship warranted further exploration. I advised that those listed should be persons with whom they felt a connection of inner importance or persons with whom their relationship had some further step of development or clarification that needed to be taken. They might be persons with whom they were presently engaged in an active relationship, persons who had played a role in the past but with whom they were not now in contact, or persons no longer living who had been significant (Proffoff, 1975, p. 175). The primary criterion in choosing persons should be the sense that there was something potential in the relationship greater than what the relationship had produced so far and/or the possibility that whatever had been inadequate or conflicted in the relationship in the past might be resolved and drawn toward its next step in the dialogue work (p. 165).
- After the girls identified an individual with whom they wanted to be in dialogue, I instructed them to write a brief statement describing the essence of the whole relationship. This introductory description should contain “the heart of the matter,” without details, make brief mention of what was affirmative and negative, what was satisfying and frustrating, what had been freely expressed and hidden. It should indicate the movement of the relationship, if known, and mention the various phases through which the relationship had passed to show how it had arrived at the present situation. The result should be a description of the relationship where it was now, even if the person were no longer there.

Relevant dates should be noted, but there should be no attempt to interpret or analyze the content of the writing.

- After the introductory statement was composed, each girl was instructed to read what she had written silently to herself without making any changes or edits, letting the original stand. If she felt a compelling need to make changes, they should be added to the original so that the changes were recorded as such. This portion of the dialogue exercise was particularly important in that writing this statement carried them into the realm where the dialogue could take place, an essential part of the preparation for the dialogue exercises (Progoff, 1975, p. 168).
- Each girl made a list of Stepping Stones for this person (using the first person perspective), as many as she might know and let the list form itself, as many things as suggested themselves. (p.170-1).
- I read the following instructions as a script in its entirety:

Now...in the silence...close your eyes. Direct your thoughts toward the other person. Let images come, sounds, words, memories, body feelings, emotions, intuitions. Behold and record them. Feel the presence of the other person. See the image of him or her, the two of you alone in this inner place. Feel the movement of the other person's life, the wholeness of life, the fullness of time in its ongoingness. We are now in the place between, in the Now moment between the past and future, the Open Moment, a free space for our inner process where the person within the process of our lives has the opportunity to give a new shape to our existence. In this Open Moment, the person within them and the person with us can meet and speak with one another without the burdens and restrictions either of the past or the future. The Dialogue process begins here: we speak to them, greet them, perhaps refer to something in the statement we have written. We say what comes to be said.

As we write, our inner attention is directed to the other person. We feel their presence and they speak back to us. We may hear it, we may feel it in the pen. We let it all be written, whatever is spoken by each of us. We speak and we listen. The other speaks and we record it as it comes. The dialogue script writes itself. We trust the dialogue script to find its own way and to bring us unpredictable awarenesses. (from Progoff, 1975; pp. 169-173).

The dialogue exercise should not be interrupted. Therefore I took advantage of the “extended” class period that was available at the school once a week, making it possible for each of them to have seventy minutes with which to work instead of the usual fifty. After they had finished writing, I instructed the girls to let themselves become aware of emotions they felt while writing the dialogue and record them as additions, making no judgments or interpretations. They could then read aloud parts or the whole piece if they wished or read alone in privacy. Each of the girls worked with the dialogue process in her own way; the specifics of the individual processes will be discussed in a subsequent chapter accordingly. As our work progressed, we continued to utilize this format to structure the dialogue process.

I also felt that it was important to add cautionary caveats. Given my own experience with this aspect of the *Intensive Journal* process, I knew that the effort of taking oneself into this area might feel like strange country, both uncomfortable and unfamiliar. I remembered that when I wrote statements about persons with whom I had been in relationship with as much seeming objectivity as I could muster, I was, in fact, giving tangible form to subjective feelings that were very delicate. During this initial process it became apparent that I was giving written expression to emotions I had been concealing, both from myself and from others. Why, then, should I not expect to feel deeply moved, shaken, unsettled, even disturbed? The metaphoric construction that Progoff provided helped me to understand that these emotions were an integral part of the process of “loosening the soil” of my inner life. I shared these aspects of my own experience with this process with the girls.

The above-mentioned exercises constituted the “pre-writing” or didactic component of the overall process in order to establish the “conditions” within which we would work.

Interviews

Prior to the onset of our work with the imaginal writing task, I conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the girls. I asked each of them the same eight questions. Each girl answered the questions in writing and then read her written answers aloud. These “baseline” interview questions were designed to solicit information regarding subjective characterizations of themselves, previously chosen behavior in the face of personal crises, the current attribution of the significance of these events, previous experience with using the writing process to explore personal experience, and some measure of their current capacity for self-reflection. The questions were intended to invite collaboration and personal investment in this research process. They also addressed the participants’ current subjective experience of hopefulness, the (not explicitly targeted) goal of this intervention (see Appendices B-D for a list of the questions and the girls’ responses).

Given that each of them had been told she would be asked to use the writing process to explore challenging personal experiences and despite the fact that they could not possibly know where this road would take them, I also asked each of them to consider personal goals in this work in order to make it possible to explore their own needs and wants and represent them in writing. I was also interested in exploring the effect of writing before speaking with the girls. Perhaps there would be a space for contemplation when each of them approached the blank page that might not be available if I just asked

the questions and they answered them out loud? I suspected that writing might first accentuate the meditative/contemplative aspect of the writing process. It might also help to solidify the conceptions as they arose. Therefore, one of the interview questions addressed the subjective experience of the writing process itself. Perhaps the answers would be more developed as a result of writing them first? There might be some degree of “safety” in the “containment” aspect of writing the answers first that would result in *more* risky content coming out. A number of opportunities to explore the denotation and connotation of specific word choices became readily apparent and would become a mainstay of the process as it continued.

The Imaginal Task

I read the directions orally to each girl and provided each of them with a copy of the task and the guiding questions (see Appendix E). I encouraged them to “consult” the imaginal and invite sensory details to emerge. As I explained it, this process was an opportunity to generate symbols and figurative language referenced to their life experience in order to know more about how they were affected by experiences, what was still “at work” under the surface. Just as the “time stretching” exercises allowed each of them to experience the fluidity of time and experience, the work in the imaginal world underscored the reflective potential in *all* experience. I explained to them that participation in this open-ended exploratory process might have a number of benefits, some of which we could not anticipate beforehand or generalize. I also discussed the option of having “company” while writing (during session time) as opposed to working on the task in solitude (at home, for example). Throughout the process I repeatedly

emphasized the collaboratory nature of this work, reminding the girls that I looked forward to learning *from* them about the writing process and how it worked on an individual, personal basis.

In the phase of the work I have termed “re-vision,” the girls had the opportunity to return to their writing with the intent to delve deeper into subjective experience as represented in writing. I saw this as an integral part of the recursive writing-as-inquiry process. Words and phrases could be “mined” for meaningful associations and suggestive images might come more sharply into view. Considerations of temporal “reality,” voice, space, and perspective played out in this process, the result of creative “writerly” choices that re-presented the ineffable aspects of experience. I read the directions for this aspect of the process orally and also provided each girl with a copy. (see Appendix F).

Data Analysis

Given the inductive nature of this research process, I utilized a “theory-after” approach to data analysis, a spiraling rather than linear process in its progression. I began with an idea, gathered theoretical information, reconsidered and refined my idea, examined possible designs, re-examined theoretical assumptions and refined these assumptions and the original idea. I conceptualized and operationalized terminology to clarify the intended meaning of concepts in relation to my study and identified criteria for measuring the empirical existence of the concepts (see below).

Verification/Triangulation procedures included prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field, utilization and review of multiple sources of data,

negative case analysis, clarification of researcher bias through on-going reflexivity, participant checking, and thick description (Berg, 2001; Cresswell, 1998; Glesne, 1999; Reinharz, 1992).

The following general issues as revealed in their behavior, speech, and writing will be addressed in the *Analysis* and *Discussion* sections:

- Response to life crises during research study
- Work with the *Intensive Journal* process
 - Feedback
 - Dialogue/the dialectic
 - Generating and establishing relationships with images as reflections
- Reading aloud
- Relationship to audience
- Work with words (including metaphoric properties, the use of and response to “triggers,” feedback, and words as reflective images)

I also sought to identify evidence of specific behaviors (tolerance of ambiguity and the inclusion of multiple perspectives) that I theorized as supporting a **dynamic process**, the **capacity for reflection** as it might (or might not) be revealed in the girls’ writing, speaking and observable demeanor. With reference to materials generously provided by Steven Cramer, MFA, I theorized that these attributes might be evidenced in the written text as follows:

- Richly associative words and phrases might convey a *tolerance for ambiguity*.

In this case, the writer would use textured nouns and visible verbs and rely on the suggestive power of metaphors and similes. Directive use of space might also be indicative of that which was left unsaid or questioned but not answered.

The text might also contain unanswered questions or leave contradictions unresolved. There would be little, if any, evidence of a rush to judgment.

- The presence of associative movement among images throughout the piece and the capacity to use and attend to images could constitute evidence of *intuitive exploration*. Metaphors and similes were also conceived of as associative devices that might initiate intuitive exploration.
- An *awareness of multiple perspectives* might be evidenced through depictions of varied colorations of tone, a willingness to engage in written dialogue, and the inclusion of different sounding *voices*, including that of the writer. The speaking voice of the piece might change and/or contradict itself. There might also be evidence of *creative tension* at work in the piece (e.g. between values of good and evil, right and wrong). The piece might admit to being complicated. The extent to which the writer implemented significant changes in the text might also be considered evidence of a willingness to include multiple perspectives.
- *Authority* in the writings could be assessed such that the speaker's voice was perceived to have strength, was singular or consistent, and/or did not engage in equivocation or qualification.
- Determinations about *relationship, connectedness, or engagement* might be revealed in the nature of the writer stance *vis a vis* her audience or through explicit statements in the text regarding the nature of affiliations with others.

In the context of a writing-as-inquiry method, the first step in the analysis was the composition of lengthy, detailed accounts of my work with the girls. As will be seen in the following chapter, I wrote about my work with Bree separately. It seemed appropriate to write about Holly and Serena interchangeably because I began working with them as a pair; several months into the process I separated them and the work

continued on individual trajectories. In these accounts, I incorporated the texts of their actual writing, excerpts from their discussions with me, specific references to observed and reported behaviors, and what I hoped were relevant excerpts from my own Notes in an attempt to create portraits of the girls and our time together. From these accounts, I was then able to make determinations about commonalities of specific themes and issues as well as note unique, individual differences. In order to maintain the narrative quality of the accounts, I chose not to embed the *Analysis* in these accounts. Instead, while I make numerous editorial asides, the reader will find the *Analysis* and *Discussion* recounted in separate sections (Chapters 4 and 5 respectively) immediately following the accounts. My primary objective in representing the data I collected in this way was to convey an evocative sense of the nature of the process that might enable the reader to reflect on his or her own assumptions about resilience and therapeutic applications of writing. With these objectives in mind, I have represented excerpts from the girls' handwritten pieces with specifically chosen fonts that most closely resemble their actual handwriting.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Bree

Bree had been referred to me as a possible participant in the study by her creative writing teacher. The teacher, a former colleague of mine, was eager to “share her” with me because she felt I would appreciate working with a young writer as intensely committed to “her craft” as Bree appeared to be. The teacher described her as “tough as nails,” a young woman who “seems to have been to hell and back and lived to tell about it.” She told me that Bree often alluded to significant personal problems in her poetry and in discussions with classmates and openly discussed her “love-hate relationship” with the way her problems “either feed her process or get in the way of it.” Bree seemed to take considerable pride in her “survivor image” among the other students, and credited her “obsessive need to write everything down” as the primary explanation of her ability to “take anything life dishes out.” She had told Bree that I was interested in finding out about what happened when teenage girls used “imaginal writing” (a phrase that was, apparently, unfamiliar to her and therefore intriguing) to “re-vision” challenging life experiences. Bree said she was “totally in favor” of “anything, something new” that might help her learn “what to do with the crazy things that have happened” so that she could “use them or be done with them.”

At the outset, I was scheduled to meet with Bree during the extended lunch period that included her study hall. In the weeks we spent together before her junior year ended, it would become a companionable mealtime; she often arrived with sandwich and bottled

water in hand, and I munched on a snack from my book bag. We worked together in an office in the Guidance Suite that was utilized for a variety of purposes by the counselors and the school psychologist. Despite the fact that there was also a table I thought she might prefer to use for her writing (located behind my chair), she always preferred to sit in the chair next to the desk where I sat and wrote either on the corner of the desk or on her lap.

There was no mistaking her affinity for writing from the first day. And her teacher was right: there was nothing tentative about Bree. She spoke definitively about her love of writing and carried her notebooks everywhere, mostly to “catch” poems that “have to rhyme.” She had strong opinions on most subjects and was not shy about sharing personal details about her life. Bree was intensely hostile toward her “crazy schizo mother” who had “worked her way down through all of them.” She saw it as her “job” to “hurt my mother just the way she hurts me.” Her older brother was “my rock, we survivors all have one.” She seemed to be close to her father “because he has been there.”

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Bree's story has some similarities to mine as well. The out of control mother who starts with the oldest (in her case, her brother) and then, when he leaves, moves on to the next one. She said her mother will not be invited to her wedding or know her children. Phew...plenty close. I was remembering how much I have played the buffer role in my life. Her brother is "her rock." We survivors all have one. Oh...and she is mystified (to tears) about how her brother tries to forgive her mother while she can't let go of her anger. I told her about the conversation I had with one of my brothers about the bitterness I feel... and he just doesn't. THAT was a major part of why I decided to make this a study of females.

Bree always listened intently when I spoke about the writing process and my personal interest in resilience. She was intrigued by the idea of experimenting with written responses to images referenced to significant people, places, and events in her life and delighted that her poetry might become a “re-vision” of her experiences, “a way to see something again.”

From the beginning, my work with Bree kept me in mind of the importance of honoring the individual process. I would dutifully make notes about my intended method for the day, and then she would burst into the office with announcements (or *pronouncements*) that often called for a modified plan. I usually asked the other girls “*So, what’s new since the last time we saw each other?*” or about any writing they might have done outside of our session time. Unnecessary questions for Bree; she needed no prompting. One day it might be “I wrote a poem about what we were talking about last time,” and she was eager to read it to me. On another day, she would “need to talk” about how much she hated this “Nazi school with its Nazi teachers,” some on-going episode with her “drama queen” girlfriends, or another episode in the on-going saga of her family life.

Given the fact that we only had a fifty-minute period in which to work, I was always mindful that time talking meant time not writing. On the other hand, our talks served our growing rapport, a relationship Bree came to characterize as “the only time in my life I could ever trust an adult.” There was never a time that her interest in all things having to do with the craft of writing was not her primary motivator. She told me many times that she felt “honored” because I always “respected” her “process” and never tried

to “impose my agenda” on her, even though I expected her to “go into places” she was “afraid to go sometimes.”

Our sessions from February to May of her junior year were devoted to getting to know each other and what I called “pre-writing,” a term I correctly assumed she was accustomed to from her English and writing classes. The “process writing” instruction she received made it possible for the students to acknowledge and respect the importance of preparing, planning, drafting, and reflecting on the subject at hand.

Would she write about “how she saw herself” so that I could begin to know her from her own perspective? I reminded her that the writing she was going to do did not have to be written in paragraph form; she was free to choose a form or follow one that emerged that might determine how she wanted to approach the subject. I wondered aloud about whether what we know as “self” might emerge from images and stories, including other people’s versions and perspectives of earlier years. I discussed the process I used to write a similar piece from my own images, starting with the “wide angle” lens and slowly narrowing the focus from the general (what other people had said and told me) to the more specific memories I came to know as my personal experience of the world around me.

Her writing on the subject developed in a bulleted list.

- *I was born to my parents*
- *I have an older brother, 3 years separate us*
- *I have hypothyroidism; I was diagnosed when I was in 5th or 6th grade-as a result of my illness I lost 4" and dealt with a weight issue for 2 years*
- *My parents divorced when I was ten but I can never remember them being happy together*
- *My little brother was born when I was ten*
- *Now that I'm older I am extremely self-sufficient but only if I want to be*

- *I hate having other people do things for me especially if it involves money*
- *I've always loved to write*
- *I have a horrible relationship with my mother*
- *I hate school w/ a passion*
- *I love summertime*
- *The beach is my sanctuary*
- *I love to party and have fun*
- *I love roller coasters and fast cars*
- *I can't live without a computer*
- *My friends are my world*
- *I look up to my older brother, I always have*
- *I can't go more than a day w/o showering*
- *I like seeing a good fight*
- *I hate being alone*
- *I don't mind cleaning as long as I feel like it*
- *I don't like being home*
- *I like to exercise*
- *I love makeup*
- *I love the pre-relationship stage*
- *I have little to no patience*
- *I've always wanted to be older*

In the following session, she announced that she had been thinking about the words "self" and "soul" following our work from the previous session.

-A self in theory doesn't exist because one's self is no other than a collection of qualities that already exist in people that have made some kind of impact on their lives.

-However over time and even for myself throughout experiences one chooses how to lead their lives almost as if they're dodging certain things that may happen had they lived their lives differently.

-People are no other than a reflection of the people they're around.

-No one can help the fact that if you are around someone for any amount of time you start to pick up their qualities. So a self doesn't exist.

So she believed in the existence of a “soul”? She replied, almost angrily, “How can you not?”

Soul: someone’s soul is what pushes them [sic] a predetermined factor almost when you don’t have any answers and you’re at your very bottom your soul leads you out. A soul is almost like an aura, something people carry around with them. Many things test the soul but it’s a strong factor that holds on without asking. It’s the vibes you get it’s the notions and the mind reading between friends it’s the warm feelings you get it’s the excitement.

Additionally, she had thought about how the two “fit together.”

Soul is what drives you to make those choices and the way you reacted to the experience that provoked the change. I thought it was self at first doing that, but it isn’t. It’s deeper than that. Soul is what makes you get out of bed at all after suffering a great loss. It is your inner monologue and thoughts that keep you from even your closest friends and family. It’s when you get physically sick because something is bothering you. It’s the choices you make because you have to.

Bree began to make regular entries in a Daily Log from the first day I talked to her about it, very excited about “recording the nuts and bolts of what has happened so I might be able to use it later.” In fact, Bree was the only one of the girls to continue this practice; as I write this, I am sure she is still making carefully dated handwritten entries in what has become the “record” of her senior year. She often read aloud portions of what she had written in the days since I had last seen her, so that she would “get the story straight” when she was recounting some episode to me. She mentioned frequently that she thought writing in this form was particularly “trustworthy.” When the only goal was to “get it down on paper.” She was less certain about the times she tried to write about her feelings. In fact, this issue would come to be particularly significant.

The day I had planned to include Bree’s first Period Log entry about the Present Moment, she arrived in typical fashion, very excited about the “Log” format and the

prospect of teenage girls being able to share their writing with each other. Before she started writing about the Present Moment, she wanted to read what she had written at home since our last meeting, a four page bulleted list she titled “Advice to Future Highschoolers.” She believed in “being prepared for whatever life throws at you” and thought other girls could learn from her experience, particularly since she “didn’t believe in lying.”

- *Don't walk around advertising Corona or Budweiser...etc. If you're going to drink, DRINK. But don't walk around school wearing everything Corona because your (sic) gonna look really dumb and it's not attractive at all ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE A GIRL!!*
- *Prom is rigged. Don't listen to anyone who tries to justify it because they're straight up lying to your face. So don't sweat it.*
- *Don't act older than you are because you only make yourself look like a stupid underclassman. Especially if you get caught up in a conversation you know nothing about.*
- *Don't try to be something you're not because there's nothing funnier than a poseur and people will make fun of you constantly.*
- *Obsessive tanning is completely unattractive.*
- *Don't screw yourself over by going over the allowed absences.*
- *Learning how to pluck your eyebrows and do your eyeliner will help you out tons.*
- *Don't touch coke, no not the soda, the powder. Understand your need to experiment but it won't think twice to control your life.*
- *Keep the necessities in your purse at all times: 2 tampons because I can guarantee someone will ask you for one and then you won't have any when you need it. Eyeliner and sharpener, roll-on lip gloss, compact mirror, cell phone, keys, deodorant (believe me it's worth the embarrassment to have someone look through your purse and see deodorant than to risk smelling disgusting). An extra pen and pencil...your writing instruments have a habit of going MIA all throughout high school. A wallet containing school ID, permit/license, money, pictures of your family and friends, a Stop and Shop card which is completely handy and a CVS card. Lotion and whatever other makeup essentials but don't go overboard.*
- *Develop a good taste/sense of music because its imperative to have an opinion on it.*
- *Nothing is sexier than confidence.*

- *Keep your cool, no matter the situation. The other person will always look like an asshole if you stay calm.*
- *Refrain from being obnoxious because it is extremely annoying.*
- *Keep an extra pair of pants and a sweatshirt in school because anything and everything may get on your clothes and it's good to have a second outfit.*
- *Don't let yourself go. Try to at least make a good appearance every day.*
- *Make friends with overprotective guys. They will help you out a lot as you get older.*
- *Try to involve yourself in some kind of sports in your freshman and sophomore years. It's a good way to make friends with upperclassmen.*
- *Carry a water bottle.*
- *Carry Advil even though the Handbook says you can't.*
- *Never wear a skirt to a school dance with shorts or any kind of tight material underneath.*
- *Go to a prom, whether it be yours or another school's—GO!*
- *If you're a freshman, don't date a senior. I'm telling you right now all he wants is your virginity and he'll drop you like a bad habit despite what he may tell you.*
- *Try to avoid getting pregnant but if you do, keep the baby. It's your own fault and if you're grown up enough to have sex then you're grown up enough to accept the consequences.*
- *Don't be afraid to confront a teacher, especially if you feel they are in the wrong.*
- *Ask questions and don't be afraid to take part in a debate. Teachers respect you for it even if your peers make fun of you.*
- *If something is too good to be true, it really is.*
- *If you get bad vibes, trust them and get yourself away from the negative energy.*
- *Don't wear padded bras. It's false advertisement and guys will make fun of you.*
- *A hair straightener can be your best friend and your worst enemy.*
- *Girls are petty and talk shit. Don't let it get to you.*
- *Tongue piercings on girls are trashy as well as any piercings to the face beside the nose and even that only some people can pull off.*
- *Don't be embarrassed to take a slower class if that's what you need to understand the material.*
- *Don't wear a white shirt with a black or dark-colored bra; it's trashy.*
- *Get into reading. The books you have to read for school will most likely suck so develop your own interest.*

- *If you're going to smoke weed, smoke weed but don't think you're cool shit for doing it. It isn't a trend, it's a lifestyle. Nothing pisses off a pothead more than someone who smokes to be cool.*
- *Don't be a loser. Stand up to say the Pledge of Allegiance out of respect. Don't think you're cool or making a statement by exercising your right not to stand up.*
- *Nothing feels better than proving a teacher wrong at any chance you get. Take advantage of it.*
- *Don't fight with your fists but your words. Hitting people is immature and self-defeating but winning an argument makes a point.*
- *If you want to piss off a teacher, sleep in their class.*
- *Don't watch the clock. It only makes it seem longer.*
- *Get your permit and license on time.*
- *Don't smoke cigarettes—it's a huge piss off to go to the bathroom and come out reeking of smoke because some kid decided to be wicked cool and smoke in a stall.*
- *Don't carry gum unless you plan on sharing. No one likes a stingy person.*
- *Beer pong is one of the best games invented but don't play if you can't handle it.*

She had composed the list in one sitting; in her view, it gave her a chance to “go back over her high school life” and “take stock” of the mistakes she had made and “turn them into something good for someone else.” She was also keenly aware of the fact that she had never been given advice about how to act from anyone she “respected or trusted” and hoped to be that figure for other girls, “at least” in her writing.

Bree's first writing about a Present Moment in her life adopted a more subdued tone and emerged in paragraph form. After she read this piece aloud, I had her return to her writing and underline “words or phrases that seem to have more energy, more heat to them; scan the piece as if it were a Ouija board.”

For about the past school year I have developed this extremely unique bond with this guy I met over the summer. Before him I would demonize guys. I would love the chase but as soon as I had them, I would lose interest. I'm still chasing with him. I know he likes me and I obviously like him but for so many reasons we are still not

together. Throughout this whole year, no matter what has happened to me, he has still been there in the back of my mind and the more I got to know him the more I grew to like him and the closer he came to the front. Recently he has taken part a lot in my life and as a result he has been the target of some of my writing.

She mentioned that the underlined sentence seems to be a “current theme” in her life and “noticeable” because she found herself spending much more time “thinking about this one than others before him...he seems to be working on me.” With the intention of modeling an associative process wherein we both followed “threads” of our thinking, I followed up on this use of words and had her compose another list of “issues” that were “working on her in this moment,” which I defined as “affecting her in ways she may or may not be totally aware of; whatever comes to mind.” Privately, I also hoped to get beyond all of these other concerns she was distracting herself with so that she could attend to her own concerns. I told her not to go into detail; she should develop categories first, without specifics and use no more than ten minutes for this exercise. Her initial list was brief:

- *School*
- *Family*
- *Friends/enemies/love interests*
- *Writing*
- *Social life*

Limited elaboration was the next step. In order to expand (also briefly and without detail), I asked her to come up with at least two specifics for each one. I was interested to note that she had more trouble doing this aspect of the exercise. Later she told me that she found the time and content limits “confining.” We would re-visit this perspective later.

- *School—hating it. The work is busy work, no learning actually takes place, dealing with petty people and teachers.*
- *Family—my mother and father not leaving me alone, my brother moving out.*
- *Friends/enemies/love interests—recently losing friendships, dealing with repercussions as well as positives. Figuring out the what ifs and trying not to play mind games or participate in them.*
- *Writing—what I do when I am bored or what keeps me awake. A drive.*
- *Social life—my dad not helping me with money.*

She looked rather pensive and a bit skeptical about writing about the Present Moment; as she said later, she wasn't used to writing about "the ordinary as if it mattered." However, there was a degree of comfort in this aspect of the process; she likened it to the "free writing" she did to "clear her mind." She had already come to find the process of returning to what she had written in order to underline, highlight or circle "heated" things to be a "new take" on her everyday life.

Today in my history class we watched this film on the Holocaust. It was so gruesome and disturbing many times I was forced to turn my head. It really interests me how one person can be so consumed with hate that it can go on to destroy literally millions of people...Prom is this Friday. It should be a good time but as it draws nearer I realize that my only really good friend there will be Ellen and that maybe I would've had a better time had I gone to [her own school's]. Although I didn't care to go to [her own]. Whatever. I guess I'll just see what happens...I get my license this coming Monday. My dad said he's waiting on some kind of settlement from my mother coming next month and then we can start looking at cars.

I offered her a choice. She could return to the Present Moment writing she did the past few sessions and scan those pieces for phrases or sentences to expand upon in writing. Or she could come up with a symbol or metaphor to represent this time in her life. There was no goal, just following the lead of her process. I suggested she do her

best to suspend the urge to make judgments. I also told her to “listen” to herself; the topic she was “supposed to” write about for the present moment would emerge, one of the major appeals of this process “in the silence.” I also noted the emphasis on writing by hand because it tends to slow the process down and seems to allow more reflection and deeper feedback.

She chose three phrases to write about: “I would demonize guys...”; “I’m still chasing him...” and “so consumed with hate.”

When I was younger and my parents were still together, my mother’s paranoia was so apparent you can read it on her face as she walked by examining all the minor details someone else would be quick to overlook. I was always told at every chance someone gets to screw you over, they will. Those words must have been carved on her brain because it seemed to be all she could think about whenever we went somewhere. She would pinpoint men in particular. She had this awesome hate for men and some distorted dysfunctional picture of what a real man is supposed to be. This explains to me why it’s so hard for me to settle. I look for the littlest thing wrong with someone especially guys and if I find something, anything, I lose interest and want to disconnect myself from them. With this recent yet not so recent person I haven’t found a thing. Or maybe it’s that I’ve chosen to look past them. He’s the only person to date that I would ever let hurt me and that stands out in my mind. It scares me but in a good way, like I’m stepping away from the past and into my own life.

Reflexivity Journal

The notion of a constant refrain in one’s childhood resonated with me (“you’re selfish” comes to mind). For Bree, it was a memory of her mother telling her that everyone was tape-recording your voice in stores, which then led to a memory of her mother searching her father’s jacket in Wal-Mart when she was 5 in order to see if he was hiding anything. Also, her mother’s explanation of why she “quit-slash-was laid off-slash-was fired” (Bree’s words) from working at Bally’s Fitness center: that some of the maintenance guys were trying to get her in trouble by smoking weed and blowing it through the vents so that she would fail a drug test.

For our next session, I had devised a three-part process, primarily in order to see if I could “bundle” some of these activities into a 50-minute exercise that could be

carried out within the confines of the school day. She would start with writing about the Present Moment. With this piece in mind, she would then compile a list of “Period Images,” just words or phrases, no elaboration from the Present Moment as she experiences it. Lastly, I would have her attend to the relationship between the images and what she wrote about the Present Moment itself.

That day she wanted to talk: she was “so worried” about two of her girlfriends and their “never-ending problems.” She had also written an angry poem about her mother and read the poem to her. Her “big mistake”? That she left the poem with her mother. “Now who knows where or when it will come back to haunt me; I was crazy to do that. I never learn.” As had become customary, the talk eventually returned to her writing. She mentioned that everything she wrote “comes back around” to being a poem. She composed the Period Moment piece first. She was intrigued to find herself “remembering” times with an ex-boyfriend, “probably because he was going to be leaving soon.”

Yesterday Danny told me he might be going into the Army Reserves. My heart hit the floor. I wanted to be selfish and tell him not to go but the more we talked about it the more I realized that this could be really good for him. I don't know what I would do with myself if he were sent over and anything happened to him. Every time he calls I still get the familiar butterflies that have resided in my stomach. We talk for as long as my phone will hold out and then deal with the annoying beeping sound that signals the battery is almost dead.

These days I really don't know what to make of him. We started out friends and then the line was crossed but have now gone back to friends. I know he has a girlfriend but why is it that whenever something important in his life happens he comes to me first? His main problem with Jen was that they couldn't talk so its almost as if he has the best of both worlds. He can come to me and tell me the details of his life and then be with her on a more physical level. He even said to me the other night that their conversations only consist of when he will be going to see her where they will just hook up and that will be the end of it. But is that love? He said to me the other night that

love can only go so far and that if she wasn't there for him on this, that would be the end of it and he would find someone else.

The list of images from this Present Moment followed. I hoped to have her begin to attend to how experiences present themselves in “pictures or sensory details” that we store and can return to. I encouraged her to attend to aspects of this time that might come back to her via her senses. This would be necessary preparation for the dialogue work that would occur later in the process. The last part of this exercise was particularly significant because it would support the “importing” work of the dialogue process.

- *The phone would ring and every time I wished it was him*
- *Whenever we were talking I wanted complete silence*
- *I always feel the need to be moving around so I usually pick up my room while I talk to him*
- *I remember going down to the stairwell because it's quiet down there although I come up reeking of smoke because that's where my brother goes to smoke. I didn't care.*
- *It was cold too!*
- *I put off doing things such as going to the bathroom so I could talk to him longer*
- *We were always laughing*
- *He didn't make me feel childish which is imperative*
- *We had reached the point where I could be myself and not worry about getting embarrassed*

After she noted that she found herself walking around or cleaning her room while talking to him, I suggested that she consider how this movement might be trying to tell her something; after all, people get itches and twitches and pains and can learn to attend to them. After considering this, she found it “cool” to make the connection between how cold she was when she was riding in the car with him and when she went out into the cold stairwell to talk to him on the phone.

The time came for our last meeting of the school year. Just after I had arrived at the high school that morning, Maura, her guidance counselor, had come to meet with me. She was concerned about possible disciplinary consequences because Bree had “spoken inappropriately” to one of her teachers. I could just picture this situation, having listened to Bree describe her many confrontational interactions with teachers she deemed ineffective or less-than-stimulating. Both Maura and I knew, however, that Bree had an ally in the vice-principal who often said that she had better judgment about adults than he did. He found it hard to mete out the usual discipline the teachers expected because Bree was “almost always right on the money” when she took a teacher to task.

Bree was waiting outside the office when I arrived in the Guidance Suite, excited to tell me about how she had been able to “get back into” something she had written with the highlighter and “lift out” words and phrases and “use them to make new pieces.” What happened when she did that? She told me that she found herself “opening out” in her writing, usually “telling the story first” or “getting more details down.” In her view, this process seemed to help her find out what she “really wanted to say in the first place; at least right then.”

The incident that “changed everything” about her life occurred one night when she was ten. She began writing about it in narrative form; many times in the coming months she would steadfastly maintain that she “had to tell the story first” in order to “get it down on paper” before she could “think about it.”

It was spring and the usual rainfall had made its appearance. My parents had recently separated so my brother and I had just started stepping into the process of joint custody. My father had just dropped us off in his bright blue Geo Metro. I remember walking up the middle of my mother's garden...it was raining but I didn't feel the need to walk fast. My father was not allowed to pull in the driveway so I had become used to walking through this garden my mother slaved over for as long as I can remember.

My brother and I eventually made it inside the house and I planted myself in front of the computer to play a game of Tetris. I remember seeing my brother go into the living room where my mother had been lying down; she didn't get up when we came in. They started shouting about some money that had no real significance but in some way enough. I remember my brother heading down to the basement enraged, almost moving in slow motion, with every step he took becoming angrier.

She read what she had written aloud just before our session was over. This was the first time but certainly not the last that she would be taken aback at the power of the sound of her own voice to bring her to tears. The feedback process was underway.

When Bree arrived the following week, she put down her bag of writing notebooks hurriedly and pulled out two sheets of paper, a poem she had written the night following our first session in which she had read aloud. There was pain in her voice; she darted from subject to subject with a nervous energy. She had been “amazed” to discover that writing the story had “opened it all up.” Much as she always wanted to record the details of her experiences, “I usually don’t like writing the story; it takes way too long to get to what I want to say.” She was intrigued by her own piece (“there is no rhyme here; it didn’t work that way”) and began to read aloud without a prompt from me.

It was early spring and the garden that guarded the house had just begun to wake

*I remember that day as if the earth was thirsty-
All it did was rain...*

I wish I heard a whisper of what was about to come

I imagine it would go a little something

A little something like this—

Unlock the sky and let the light shine on through

Let it consume you

Breathe deep

For this is your last breath of truth.

Bree told me that she has been “obsessed” with the idea that there should have been some sign that night of what was going to happen or that she missed some kind of warning. “I was playing that stupid game; the louder the voices got, the more I was stuck in that chair. It took me forever to get up.”

*Can you put a picture on love?
A feeling on passion...
Well I can put a smell on hate
Its stench can suffocate a room
It smells of gasoline
I still remember the pounds how they sound against a deadbolt door
He screamed for understanding
To be loved a little more
Instead she threw him outside all alone
In the rain threw a tent without all its parts
Screamed “You think you can do better on your own?”
I looked out the fog paned windows
As the sirens drew closer
And I knew they were coming to take him away
But now I know the truth needs to be told
Fact is he was scared
He was only a boy with no answers.*

Her mother called the police that night. Later Bree’s mother told her that her thirteen year-old brother had been taken away for two years “because he talked back to me.” Her mother told everyone else he had tried to burn down the house.

*I wasn’t allowed in court
A boy made prematurely into a man
He needed someone’s steady shoulder to lean on
My father was the one to unpack his rain-soaked things
He would never have to apologize for feeling again.*

That day, Bree and I began to talk about what the word “truth” meant to her; we would come back to this subject many times because she had “always been confused” by

different versions family members have told about what “really” happened that night. At first she just kept saying that the truth is “just what happened, simple as that.” Six years later, and Bree isn’t so sure. She saw her mother “living in la-la land where she hears voices whispering to her and sees things that don’t happen. That makes it harder to know.”

Before we began the planned activity, I told her that her counselor had sought me out (as I always did, by previous arrangement with all concerned, when someone came to speak with me about her). As usual when she perceived adults to be “talking *about* her rather than *to* her,” she was quick to anger. She had told the teacher “the truth,” that she was having trouble understanding what he was trying to teach, adding that if he checked with some of the other students “just once,” he might find out the same thing from them. She lamented her “gutless” peers’ inability to “stand up for themselves or even give a shit when they couldn’t learn.” Similarly, she blasted her counselor for “crossing boundaries” and telling this teacher that Bree was seeing a therapist because “now he will just think I’m a nutcase, when the reality is I am more solid on the ground than he’ll ever be.” In fact, I had been concerned as well when Maura had told me that she had shared this information with the teacher. I knew from my own professional experience that the counselors operated on a “need to know” basis that required a subjective assessment of the situation and a judgment of the teacher’s ability to handle the information constructively. In this case I agreed with Bree. This teacher was “notorious” for his poor classroom management and awkward interactions with students. However, it was done. I always took this approach with the girls: *we can’t go back and change what has already happened but we always have a choice about how to react to it.* Bree frequently

challenged this perspective, saying repeatedly that it certainly didn't feel as if she had a choice.

Although I remained concerned about her foul moods, usually precipitated by what she termed her "blind hatred of authority" perpetuated by her parents, teachers, or an administrator. I came to learn that the dark clouds would usually dissipate when it came time to write. The physical act of writing seemed to help her dispel the intensity of these reactions, one of the reasons she vastly preferred working with a pen or pencil on paper rather than the computer. She told me she experienced a "slowing down" when she wrote by hand that was apparently calming and soothing. She also affirmed the personal benefit of a writing approach to therapy on many occasions. She felt "less shaky" when she could think about our work together as "just as much about" her writing as it was about "making sure I don't turn out like my mother." She said she felt more inclined to do the "icky personal stuff" because she was increasingly convinced that there would be a "payoff" in her writing; she had already seen it happen. What did that look like? In addition to what she learned when she reviewed what she had written as mentioned above, she also found herself "thinking more and more about what the truth is" both in her own words and the words of others.

I had decided that the last session of the school year and the start of the summer vacation would be an appropriate time to work with the Steppingstones for the first time. She should work on this list for only ten minutes with no concern for analysis or judgment. I did not have her read this list aloud so as to prevent the feedback effect from interfering with the elaboration/expansion she would do next. When she was done with

the list, I had her make some chronological notation next to each item if she could. Her chronology was linked to school:

- *My decision to move in with my dad (6th grade)*
- *To start and stop smoking weed (8th grade-ongoing)*
- *Drinking (10th grade)*
- *Getting in a car when I know the driver isn't sober (10th grade)*
- *Getting my therapist (11th grade)*
- *Stop being friends with certain people (11th grade)*
- *When I used to steal when I was younger (5th-6th grade)*
- *Helping Steph move out of her house (11th grade)*
- *Driving all the way back from CT by myself (11th grade)*
- *Accepting a high (9th grade)*

I then asked Bree to return to her list and compose a “verb statement” for each item on the list. She was to identify an action verb and write one sentence in which she would “capture the essence of what happened” at that moment in her life. She would then read this list aloud. I offered this example of a list from my notes: *“I was born. I loved. I danced. I wept. I posed. I suffered. I was entranced. I was humiliated. I got lost. I am trying to find my way.”* After she had finished her list, she re-read it to herself (as she did with all of her writing before reading it aloud to me), and I watched her eyes widen. As it turned out, this one exercise would turn out to be very moving for each of the girls.

- *I fled.*
- *I experimented.*
- *I washed myself out.*
- *I took a risk.*
- *I got tired of the struggle.*
- *I did not compromise.*
- *I wanted things I didn't have.*

- *I helped.*
- *I made it by myself.*
- *I gave in.*

Bree was uncharacteristically silent for a few moments after she read this list out loud, and I waited with her “in the silence.” She finally said that she was “stunned by how this turned out.” She didn’t force it, just “went with whatever verb came to mind” and was really intrigued by what the verbs “told” her about “the effect of these experiences on me, more than I ever knew before.” She was also pleased by the “poetic sound” of the list. She would later describe this activity as one she used on many occasions to “begin to find out what I really think about something.”

Her junior year was over, and she “desperately looked forward” to the summer vacation that “stretched out” before her, a perky allusion to my emphasis on “time-stretching.” We made plans to meet over the summer, both of us anticipating an opportunity to work in longer blocks of time unhindered by the constraints of the school day. Perhaps we could meet at the new town library; she also invited me to come to the apartment she shared with her father and brother

Process Journal

Bree and I are meeting at the library today, in a high ceilinged room with tall windows overlooking the garden...but no doors. The colors of the flowers are almost neon bright in the sun. We sit across from each other now; it seems more formal and the table seems to have created a divide. That...or the fact that we are not in the more familiar school setting. I don't know how this will work; it is quiet and I cannot hear anyone else, but I am unsure about whether we can be overheard. There are no rooms with doors available for “small meetings.” I met her father, a short, graying man with a scruffy beard. He is a substance abuse counselor for the Department of Social Services. She seems easy with him; he seems dedicated to making this work. Her friend Ellen will pick her up.

For the sake of continuity, and because I had come to depend on her willingness to cart all of her writings around with her, I asked her to return once again to the lists she had made in the previous session. She was perturbed; even though she remembered to bring paper and pens, she had forgotten her writing bag. I had my own copy of her lists she could use for reference.

I directed her to choose one item from the original Steppingstones list and write briefly (five or ten minutes) about how her life might have been different if this event had not occurred or had occurred in a different way. My objective here was to encourage her to consider different perspectives, “take a different view” on her experiences.

Had I not moved in with my dad I would be quick to say that I wouldn't be here today. I don't know if that's the way things would have happened because I obviously didn't choose to do that. Today I am extremely against suicide. I think it's for cowards. When I was living with my mom I started something along the lines of cutting. I saw it on TV and knew it was bad but saw similar situations and how it gave temporary relief to the characters. I have never had any intention to kill myself because no matter how much I complain about life, I'm still alive. I realized the importance of life after I found out teenagers are not invincible. I knew people could die but it never really processed before. So had I stayed at my mother's house I think I would be completely different, a lot more bitter and a lot less careful about my life, almost like a subtle suicide so I wouldn't have to take responsibility for my actions had something happened. Even though I'd be dead if I killed myself but had I survived I would have to take on the responsibility.

Bree and I had the same reaction when she read this piece out loud. “Listen to that ending; I'm all over the place.” Did she think the change in setting had anything to do with this perceived change in her writing? I wondered to myself if the openness of this space felt less secure. In fact, she had made marginal notes about that: *“jumping all over the place...unfamiliar surroundings and missing my notebooks may play part in*

why I can't write as well." In keeping with the collaborative nature of our work, I told her that it would be helpful if we both continued to note these changes and their possible effects on the work, making it all the more possible for me to learn from her about how the process worked and the significance of the conditions.

In the spirit of the intrepid traveler, I directed her to return to her original list once more (the one I had not heard her read aloud but had read to myself after the last session according to prearranged routine). She should "scan it" as she had done with other pieces of writing before, to see if something she had noted there might be a "trigger" for her writing this day.

Bree scanned the list in silence until she came to the last item on the list. Her eyes lit up. "I know what I will write about; this was so important to me." The topic she chose was the one that had mystified me. From her writing that day, I would learn even more about how Bree explained her world and her behaviors to herself.

"Accepting a high"

I first started smoking weed because I thought it was an interesting concept. I pictured the high would be like some acid trip and that scared me off a bit. Before I started smoking I would take miscellaneous muscle relaxers or pain killers not for any reason really but just to see what would happen. My friend Julie first got me to smoke in her backyard the summer going into freshman year. I didn't get anything from it and it didn't appear to me as anything I would really care to do more. Until one weekend in my sophomore year my friend at the time Danielle's parents went away and left her the house. We were all hanging out, Juli, Dani, and I and decided to smoke a bowl but no one had a pipe. So just for shits and giggles they made a ghetto out of a 2 liter bottle. I took 3 hits and was more stoned than I had ever been at the time. I thought I was fine but realized something was iffy when they went outside to smoke a butt being winter there was snow on the ground and I had socks on when I came back in the house I couldn't feel my feet or the ground beneath me. My mind was still clear though. We decided to watch Donny Darko. Bad idea for new smokers when you're stoned. We got about half an hour in and I started feeling cloudy funny how I explain it like that but being high feels like someone secures a cloud on your brain for a few hours I think it

might have relation to the smoke part. (Here she inserted a new paragraph symbol when she re-read the piece).

Anyways after the movie we went into the kitchen and all of a sudden I felt so small. Like I was outside of them. The way I explained it to them was like I was in a movie theater all by myself and it was dark like tunnel vision and they were on screen talking in front of me. Apparently I started to cry for like an hour I only remember 10 minutes. They brought me down stairs but it felt like my whole perception was spinning. One thing I found weird was the only way I could tell my brain I wasn't alone was if I touched their arm and apparently really hard. Something else that was really weird was after drinking lots of water I obviously had to go to the bathroom and while there looking in the mirror at myself I felt fine. So I thought it was over and invited them in the bathroom with me to help me back down stairs. It came right back as soon as I left. Finally after maybe 5 hours it stopped. I was fine kinda giggly high but fine. I went to sleep and woke up the next morning fine. The next day I went to Boston with my dad and his girlfriend at the time and Steph. I was so bugged out the whole day. It had come back. My brother later explained it as reliving it in my mind which made it a reality it lasted a good week it scared me so bad I told both my parents and went to the doctor but not until I sat myself down and accepted the drug did it go away and never return.

She was obviously pleased with this piece and read it aloud. When she finished, she said that writing this and reading it to me was a "bit of a risk" but that she "trusted that I wouldn't pass judgment on her by now." This time in her life, she said, was "very important" because she had "learned to get beyond fear and accept something on its own terms."

From the beginning, I had told all of the girls that I would not to make judgments or state my opinions about the content of their work or share it with others (unless I had the impression that they were in imminent danger) because I was encouraging them to follow the lead of what occurred to them as freely as possible. However, if they asked my opinion, on the other hand, I would share it with them. Bree had made passing references to "smoking weed" on a number of occasions, usually justifying it in terms of being "good for my writing." As she said to me this day, this piece she had done helped

her understand “how she moved from Point A to Point B” so that she was “more free” to write. She steadfastly maintained that she “remembered every single thing that she said or did” when she was “high” and that “things were so much more subtle and interesting” in that state. “Lots of artists get high” she added. Did I see anything wrong with that?

Of course I had concerns about regular (illegal) drug use; that’s what we were talking about here, and it was important to remember that and call it what it was. I reminded her that she was adamantly opposed to taking any of the medications her psychiatrist had prescribed because they would “change who she was,” but she didn’t have the same reservation about the changes that occurred when she was under the influence of marijuana. I had already determined that she was discussing her drug use with her psychiatrist and the school counselor. She maintained that she never came to school high and only used the drug “recreationally.” This appeared to be true; there were no disciplinary reports to that effect in her record. Given her father’s occupation as a substance abuse counselor, she found the situation “ironic,” yet another method she used to “take jabs” at this particular adult (parental) authority. After all, she was fond of stating that “my parents have nothing to say about my life; they can’t touch me.” It was on this day that I began to see that Bree was using her writing to justify potentially destructive decisions and positions *vis a vis* adults who might, if she “accepted” them as readily as she did her drug use, offer support. Increasingly I began to attend to her affect when she read aloud in my on-going effort to clarify the relationship between her writing and her way of moving about in her world.

With her father’s permission, Bree and I next worked together in the living room of the apartment she shared with him near the beach in a crowded neighborhood of

multiple family homes off a dirt road. She was very upbeat. She had a “new boyfriend” who turned out to be Tommy, the one she had been writing about previously. The new development in this relationship seemed “natural, like we’ve been going out forever.”

This day marked the transition from the “pre-writing” phase into the “imaginal writing” phase of the study. Therefore, it was time for her to identify “a topic,” a general situation to consider as the focus of this upcoming work. It had been a few weeks since our last meeting, and I had suggested that she anticipate this “assignment.” I suggested she choose something that she considered still “unsolved” and “at work” in her life to explore in her writing. She had indeed done just that, had given it “considerable thought” and had done some writing about it. She had narrowed “the list of possible ideas” to two, both of which had to do with relationships, with her mother or “past, present and future boys in my life.” When she started talking to me about the choice ahead, I suggested that she write about the possible risks and benefits of each instead. Without direction from me, she wrote about the potential topics in two columns, naming them “mother” and “relationships/boys.”

Mother

*Continue to help me work
through problems new and
old with my mother.
Feelings of guilt for
when this is over
and my mother sees
it I don't want her
to feel the way I
do about her despite
what she's done.
I almost want her
to see that I've*

*taken steps to not
 feel the way I do
 dealing with old problems I was
 forced into by
 birth and had no
 choice in happiness
 just forced to feel and deal
 with it.*

Instead of thinking the same thing over and over I can read it once and see it for what it is and bring my thought process to the next step and eventually come out with an outcome.

In her second list, she expanded on her perception of “relationships.”

Relationships/Boys

*Overanalyzing situations is bad
 and good because I'll probably
 do it anyway having it down
 on paper may make things
 more clear but also make
 them being thoughts—feel
 more permanent and almost
 secretive.*

*Throughout my relationship
 it would be nice to have
 more adult feedback and if
 something were to really come
 from my new relationship
 it would be awesome to
 have even my smallest
 thoughts documented and
 restored.*

*Starting something completely
 new and on my own.*

Throughout this whole decision between Danny and Tommy was starting out brand new for myself for the better. Writing was my thought process, just written down is easier to trust your thoughts and instincts when they're looking back at you on paper.

The column format that emerged allowed for a more direct comparison of the two topics that seemed to be helpful to Bree. Her decision: to work on “relationships/boys.” “For once” she would like to “take a break” from the “never-ending focus” on her mother and “do something positive, more for myself.” I felt compelled to remind her that “stuff about your mother may come up anyway.” That would be “OK” with her because “at least I would have some feedback about what to do when that happens.” In fact, she noted that her relationship with her mother was already “at work” here. “I blame my mother because I had no one to ask about relationships, no role model before.”

Reflexivity Journal

I did share with Bree our common ground re mixed or missing messages from mother. I defined mixed messages: when you hear words but they don't ring true in your bodily sense of what is being said. Such a sad thing: she found the card her father had written to her mother trying to apologize for something he said and her mother's angry letter back. She was 10. Horrible. When I was 10, I had to testify at my mother's second divorce trial about my stepfather's mistress appearing at my window. I left that out, however, when I was talking to her.

Her enthusiasm seemed to grow as she read this next “free writing” list aloud. I had her return to the work and highlight “potential sub-topics, words and/or phrases that could be unpacked later.” For example, her expression “too good to be true.” What does *that* phrase mean in terms of what she expects? Or as she put it: what do I think I deserve?

“The Romantics”

- *No example of how to work in a romantic relationship*
- *Growing up in a household full of boys I feel as though I connect to men better. I've even been told by guys that I do.*
- *My feeling that I've reached the point in my life where I want to start new and experience life the way I want to see it*
- *With Tommy things seem to be too good to be true but extremely genuine*
- *I feel as though everything for so long has been clear and finally its been supplied*
- *It becomes extremely clear how bad Danny was and would've been*
- *Tommy makes me feel how I feel I should be treated*
- *Our relationship is completely relaxed and comfortable*
- *He would never do something to jeopardize our relationship so all I have to do is worry about me and I'm not about to fuck it up*
- *People have said repeatedly how jealous they are and I feed off it*
- *I've never been this person and now that I am I feel as though all my waiting has paid off because I have literally everything I ever wished for.*
- *This feeling of meant to be is overwhelming. When someone can make you believe in something you've hated for so long it builds an automatic trust and I think that's why we're not awkward. (added note after re-reading: makes me believe in something my parents instilled in me as failure)*
- *He never had a mom to learn how to treat women and I never had a mom to learn how to treat men and I think that's why we will work because through each other we will help one another learn.*

Bree's life seemed to be one improvisation after another. Before we left, she pulled out a notebook that appeared similar to the others she carried with her in her "writing bag." This notebook was full of writings done by her friends while they were "under the influence." As she was prone to do with her other notebooks, the primary function of this one was also "to record every little thing that was said or done." In her view, she had a "rare opportunity to get it in their own words." She had "invented" this notebook, and it was "very popular" with her friends; they had all written at least one entry in it. She was also very protective of this book; she "never let it out of her bedroom except when she had company or was going somewhere where she could "get material."

She showed me examples of poems she and her friends had written; many of them were scrawled at odd angles across the page or written in various combinations of printing and cursive handwriting. Other notebooks of all shapes and sizes were stacked or piled around her room. It was clear this young woman had been writing for years; she decorated her room with writing notebooks. I couldn't help remembering that she credited her mother with teaching her and encouraging her writing. Needless to say, she was bringing "unfinished business" to the table every time she sat down with a pen and paper.

Reflexivity Journal

I don't know what to make of Bree's "bravery" which she defines as "being willing to say 'fuck you' and take your own risks." Given my teenage experience as a "saint," I have to admit this approach has some weird appeal. After all, she creates the impression that she is more able to do things others wouldn't approve of (without negative consequences) and more able to explore her likes and dislikes than many other girls her age. I played it safe... and look what happened. What is "safe"? What is "dangerous"?

As usual, when working with Bree, I am reminded that we have complicated mothers in common. We both learned survival skills in order to put them in some kind of perspective that would enable us not to succumb to depression and despair. Nevertheless, there are consequences. As Bree said, she was almost suicidal until she moved in with her father at 14. I escaped to college at 16. However, as she also said, she didn't have anyone to help her figure things out and had to do it herself. THAT is what I am trying to prevent with this process.

It was the beginning of her senior year, and I was anxious to make contact again. I was also a bit worried because our appointment was scheduled for the last period of the day. However, Bree did show up; I couldn't help being gratified that she was apparently still motivated enough to be here on a Friday afternoon. She seemed glad to see me. The first thing she wanted to do was show me the new "journal" she had started, meant to be an account of her senior year. "Sort of like the Daily Log, only longer." From what she

had learned in our work so far, she hadn't set herself any particular task or direction when she wrote an entry in it, which was "new" for her; usually she "had an agenda" when she sat down to write. Most of the writing so far was criticism of the school; she was "already reacting to the deadness of it." I acknowledged the significance of the onset of her senior year. Even though she was already disheartened by school, I felt it was important to remind her that she had options about how to "work with what was given" and that she was "close to her future, having her own life roll out in front of her."

Back to our work together. In response to the standardized interview questions, I directed her to write her answers before reading the written answers aloud and discussing them because I was interested in whether the act of writing before talking was also part of the beneficial results to be derived from the process. Privately I wondered: might there be a space for "reflection or contemplation" when one approached the blank page that would not be available if I were to just ask the questions and she answered them out loud? I was also curious about whether the answers would be more developed as a result of writing them first. There might also be some measure of "safety" in the writing of the answers that might result in *more* risky content coming out. The first four questions were designed to solicit information regarding subjective characterizations of self, previously chosen behaviors in the face of personal crises, current capacity for self-examination, and current attribution of the significance of those events. I did not specify a format for her written responses. With the Progoff method in mind and its purposeful avoidance of analysis or judgment, I did not comment specifically on the content of any of the written answers. (see Appendix B).

Bree's voice wavered between strident defiance and teary resignation when she read some of her answers aloud. She was furious at the tears, considering them "weak" and "ridiculous"; she had "no idea why I do that." Privately, I couldn't help suspecting that she was using a great deal of energy struggling with this duality. For the first time, I was hearing (and observing) the contradiction between the words she was using in her writing and speaking about her experiences and the affect that was revealed when she read the words aloud. I suggested that she "consider" the tears and other "reactions" that occurred when she was reading aloud as more "feedback from herself to herself." She was struck by this idea; much as she "hated to cry more than anything in the world," the idea that her body would be "giving her a message" was appealing. "It all seems so simple, put like that." For someone who was so accustomed to struggle, this might be a welcome relief.

She and I began our next session this day talking about the journal (as "artifact") that she was keeping of her senior year. Most of the entries were critiques, because she said she "finds herself" criticizing both positive and negative events, school, and people. She planed to share this journal with her children in order to give them "evidence of how far they can go, the line they can't cross." Privately, I acknowledged the confluence of emerging impressions from her writing that increasingly confirmed she was using the writing process to develop a sense of authority as an empowerment strategy.

We started our work with the next interview question. I reminded her that there was no "required" format for her written answers, and that I would ask her to read what she had written aloud when she was finished.

After re-reading her explanation of “helpful” personality traits, she added a note:

This would make me happy that I could take something so negative and pull something positive out of it. Bringing a sense of happiness and self-fulfillment which is what I strive for in most things that I do.

To be opinionated and strong: Usually when I'm dealing with something difficult its [sic] because someone is making it difficult for me. I find it imperative [sic] especially in girls for them to form an opinion for the situation and to educate themselves on it and stand their ground.

Be open with the way you feel and give it a voice! Feelings are just that things you feel. If you are angry be angry don't feel bad for the way you feel just feel because its [sic] a hell of a lot better than being numb.

Bree referred to her list and explanations as a “how-to guide for survival.” I acknowledged her affirmation of the necessity of having opinions and a voice because I continued to be particularly interested in what kinds of voices girls do or don't have in the face of challenging experience. She acknowledged her awareness that sometimes girls' voices were “stifled, in the past particularly, back when they tried to keep them barefoot and pregnant.”

Subject Journal-Bree

She is in “reactive” mode all the time. Much of what she sees as her strengths seem to be her method of warding off blows.

As I asked her the next interview question about self-descriptive words, I remembered the power of individual words to evoke a deep response when she composed the “verb statements.” She remembered it too. After I listened to her read what she had written about the words, I began to sense a lack of alignment between her behavior and what she wrote about it. Therefore, I needed to deviate from the “protocol.” I asked her how she would characterize these aspects of herself. Did she “value” these traits? She

hesitated, and I was taken aback by the uncharacteristic lack of bravado. “On the surface,” these traits seemed “admirable.” I wanted to see if that kind of self-appreciation ran more than superficially deep. Privately, I suspected that some of those behaviors made her life a bit more challenging... because she challenged life at every turn. I realize now that I was reacting to my perception that these traits might have been cultivated “for show” and were causing her as much trouble as they were helping her avoid.

I like who I am now but I never really liked who I was until this point. I've changed a lot especially in my high school years. I've done a complete 360 since my parents [sic] divorce. There are traits in myself that I maintain because they're traits that I've admired in people I've come across in my life. I am a collection of traits that I admire however I'm still dealing with things that have happened in my past that drag me back to my old self. I don't like how I am extremely [sic] tempormental [sic] about certain things but I like how I let myself get angry and then work through it. So I guess I'm under construction, a work in progress ill [sic] never be satisfied with myself because ill [sic] always find ways to better myself whether it be socially excepted [sic] or not.

As it turned out, her response to this question underscored the significance of her parents' divorce as an obviously pivotal moment in her young life. It also elicited revealing commentary about how she perceived herself changing in response to what was happening then and now. She hearkened back to her thoughts about the “self” being constructed in terms of relationships with others and insisted on preserving the demarcation between “old” and “new” self, refusing to see herself as the same person she was before her parents' divorce. She wrote about this “new self” protectively, as if it were the one that had some potential to help her “work through” the problems of the past. There was evidence of the on-going struggle to keep certain traits (being “tempormental,” which she termed synonymous with “weepy”) “under control.” She seemed to have some

capacity for self-reflection in that she allowed that events from her past were still “working on her,” but I didn’t trust what sounded like certitude in her “voice.” On the surface she sounded convincingly wise and insightful, so much so that she could fool others (and herself) quite easily. I suspected that she already had. I was glad I had asked this question; the choice to do that validated the value of follow-up questions, which occur as a form of “trusting the process” in a semi-structured interview.

Subject Journal-Bree

Ran into [her writing teacher] who has just been named Acting Vice-Principal, a rather startling (“weird” as Bree put it) turn of events. First thing this morning; she sought me out to comment on the positive changes she sees in Bree. Was generously attributing that to her work with me. Specifically, she sees Bree getting to class on time, wearing less makeup, being less hostile toward adults in school. Also noted the new (more positive) boyfriend relationship...she thought I was “clearly on to something with this process.” Instead, I remember how fast school personnel like to assume that problems have been solved so they can move on to the next one. I have to be watchful for that same tendency in myself, given the years I worked in this environment; it is so tempting to believe that healthy change occurs fast rather than slowly and that identifying the cause and effect link is that obvious.

In our next session Bree and I did more talking than writing, sometimes necessary in this setting with fifty minute periods if the objective is to facilitate a creative process that might also be therapeutic. I expected, at the outset of this study, that a certain amount of talk was necessary to maintain rapport, clarify issues, and establish an environment conducive to this on-going, sometimes demanding work. Nevertheless, it was hard not to be frustrated at the lack of flexibility in the schedule when the trade-off would be less writing time. When Bree arrived, I passed along the compliment from the new Vice-Principal. She was “flattered that she noticed; usually no one sees the good things.”

Today she wanted to talk about her “weed” use again. She had to pass a drug test to work at the local department store where she had just applied for a job. Therefore, it looked like she would not be hired; her drug use was “the price I pay” for not having a job. She likened her experience with “smoking weed” to hang gliding and bungee jumping, both of which she wanted to try because she “liked living on the edge.” When I pressed her, she reiterated her stance against taking anti-depressants because they “mask” her personality. If I were to understand the basis of her thinking, I would have to see that I would be asking her to prefer her “ordinary” life rather than the one she had come to experience “under the influence.” I observed that she professed to like living “on the edge” and yet she became distinctly uncomfortable when personal experiences seemed “out of control.” The issue was medication, of one kind or another, and the word “mask” seemed to cloud the issue. Given the nature of this conversation and the way in which Bree used the word “mask” to represent her subjective response, I explained that I had decided to return to the five words she had listed in the previous session and have her identify an object or image that would represent each of those words in a similar fashion. I also hoped this would be an effective entrée into the imaginal process.

Opinionated—I would represent this word with a pen and one of my many journals. I have always been known to be outspoken but I’ve also been known to not sugarcoat anything in my journals seeing how I pick and choose who reads it or if it gets read at all. Some of my greatest thoughts are written down alongside why I think that way and what I have an opinion about.

Trustworthy- I would represent trustworthy with a blank page of paper. Anything you choose to write down will be nothing short of your own truth. I’ve had instances where I loose [sic] all trains of thought and just write to find the truth. Paper can’t judge nor lie but only make you answer to.

Honest- I would represent honesty with a photograph something that captures truth a still frame of just whoever is in the picture @ face value. Nothing more nothing less just the honest truth.

Real- I would represent reality with a tear drop. Being real to me means the ability to let yourself feel without restriction. Having emotions, opinions, and above all, just to live.

Free-I would represent freedom with the Pink Floyd Symbol. The type of free I mean is not what I get from the Constitution but from listening to a good band with some friends maybe smoking a little bit of weed to take the hard edge of reality away to slip into a realm where you just feel free from all inhibitions and restrictions a world without censors [sic] that I have to live in everyday mentally and physically.

I was struck by how, once again, she was using the writing process almost solely to reinforce rather than question her own opinions and perspective. I shared this observation with her, given the fact that one of the reasons I was doing this study (and had chosen to work with the Progoff Intensive Journal) was to “move beyond” the “limitations” of conventional journals he and others had identified. I had told her about Progoff’s process of developing the journal method when we began working with it, specifically that he had come to attach increasing significance to the value of feedback or response, which didn’t happen if someone were just writing alone and the writing was never “heard.” Hence the objective of reading aloud. Initially defensive when I commented on or challenged her position, she was also keenly aware of her own propensity to challenge most things said by other people. In fact, she and I agreed (grudgingly on her part) that these “challenge sessions” were some of the most productive, albeit “sticky” discussions we had. She told me (as did the other girls about this part of the process) that after many sessions of reading her writing aloud, she began to hear my voice in her head as she was writing. She took this as a “clear sign” that

whatever she was writing at the time might not be “as true, fixed in concrete” as she thought. I said that this was an indication that she was beginning to “internalize” the feedback from our dialogues. “Maybe this could be good news too, that what I always thought was the truth might not always be the end of it.”

At our next session, Bree arrived eager to “get on with” the rest of the interview questions. She said she was finding herself thinking about them, particularly since she was writing out her answers. Were there particular items on the list she would like to tell me more about? “I love it when I get in the rhythm of it, like when I am really upset and the words just pour out. One of the best things I ever did was writing things I was thinking about my mother on little bits of paper and then burn them; they were gone and so was she. Oh, and the notes like letters that I wrote to my dad were the only way I could communicate with him for a long time when I first went to live with him.” When she read this last line aloud, she looked up. “I never used to think about my writing as having anything to do with talk with other people. It was just about what I thought and that was it.” She laughed nervously. “Now I’ll have to think about what that means.”

Reflexivity Journal

The day ended with Bree; there are a number of issues she and I share. I am mindful of how fiercely independent she is...and how much she protects herself with that fierceness...also how fragile. I never realized how sensitive and fragile I am until just a few years ago. I never used adjectives like those to describe myself (nor did I call myself “creative”). In fact, I shunned them, for reasons that are obvious to me now. I will need to think about ways to help her honor her strengths...and not negate what she may perceive as weaknesses; rather she is a multi-faceted young woman and sensitivity is enormously helpful to the creative process. It is also part of her being female. No doubt it is also a by-product of her having to be hyper-vigilant in her childhood (as I was). She has had to have her radar up all the time in order to protect herself and ward off chaos.

There is more posturing and less “truth” in what she is writing than she is willing to admit.

At this point in our work together, seemingly “out of the blue” (as the Vice-Principal put it) Bree began a steadily accelerating “downward slide.” She was “suddenly” increasingly argumentative and “out of sorts.” Both her counselor and this former writing teacher tried speaking with her to no avail; she said to them bitterly that “she needed help from no one”; rather, she would “go it alone as usual.” Bree arrived for our next session clearly agitated; her English teacher had accused her of not returning two books and threatened her with “no graduation” if she didn’t pay for the books. In return, she was refusing to talk to the teacher; when faced with “arbitrary” authority, she resorted to “anger mode” and shut down. Similarly, Bree’s writing process was becoming more disjointed and irregular. She frequently refused invitations to “follow up” or return to her previous work, which I began to consider as an evasive maneuver. On this day, I shared with her that these two faculty members who so clearly cared about her welfare had come to see me. I began to probe. I asked her how things were going with her boyfriend, Tommy and she produced a long diatribe about how he changed every time they were around his friends, and she was beginning to think their relationship was not as important to him.

At this point she began to cry. “There was no way” she would talk to him about this, she was too afraid she would “blow up and lose it.” This was a cycle she recognized. It was what she always did for protection when the rejection was coming. “I’ve had a lot of practice,” We talked about writing a letter to him, as she had to her father with positive results. She thought about a plan to let him read her journal. How might that affect her writing process? Instead, could she write to him directly? We were

at an impasse; she could not write to him directly and was unable to imagine talking to him without “losing it.” In her mind, the relationship could be over if that happened.

At the end of the session she started to tell me the story of her latest argument with her mother; she was upset about this situation as well because she had been “short” with her little brother Mikey and “he never deserves that. He is just caught in the middle as we all have been with her.”

Subject Journal-Bree

Given how she was today, it is even more obvious that she is “smoking weed” to medicate herself. All of her protestations about enhancing the creative process aside, there is so clearly that. She doesn’t know what to do with all of this emotion she feels. It scares her, overwhelms her. So much for living on the edge.

I did not see Bree again for two weeks; she had been absent from school, which was highly unusual given our recent conversations. I had checked in with her counselor and the Vice-Principal, both of whom indicated they were aware of her increasing drug use and “more alarmed” about her “erratic” behavior.

She found the last interview question “annoying and cliché” when she first heard it, “like I didn’t even want to write about it but then look what came out of it. Go figure.” I explained that the question was designed to explore how she might “picture” her future life because I was concerned about how teenagers felt about what was coming in their lives that was uncertain and they could not predict. I suggested that she try to “see” the future, not just in written generalities. I suggested that she be alert and attentive to all the ways in which images of the future might come. Later, Bree commented after she read this answer aloud to me that she “tried to steer away from where I saw myself but to why

I saw myself that way.” I hoped to support her developing ability to reflect on her past and her future in this way.

Subject Journal-Bree

Her motto: “don’t have high expectations because you will just get disappointed.” She “hates” people who do things like Tommy did and take a risk with life like that because it can all be over in a flash (a reference to the students who died in the car crash last year). How can they do that? she asks. I have the same question, of course; I emphasize that this is yet another thing she and I share. As she put it, “you can’t forget the past and you can’t know the future, so why not run with it, take it as it comes?” Look at what she wrote today; the bit about marriage being so potentially time-consuming because she is so deathly afraid of divorce...how close to home for me. What she has on me is this tenacity about honoring her own process. How to help her honor it as a strength while not enabling it as a defensive stance?

I am spending this much time talking with her lately because I sense she needs this support. These girls are, after all, fragile and their “strength” is easily compromised. She is also trying to learn new behaviors. She did mention one reason she has always written everything down is that there was no one to talk to about what she was feeling, what was happening. So she used writing to have a dialogue...with the experience? Herself? The only problem; there was still no reply from anyone else, a different voice.

She always re-reads and sometimes makes notes on what she has written before she signals to me that she is done. There is always the audience.

It was now late October; I sensed that she was overwhelmed and tired. However, she was dogged in her determination to “keep trying.” So, on we went. I introduced the work with the imaginal writing task as “an entry into the imaginal world that encourages imaginative associations about things that have happened to us, a new way to reflect on what has happened and possibly see things in a new light.” Did she still want to address the relationship with Tommy? Or her mother? I also appreciated the way in which this kind of non-directive process would continue to support the creativity of her associative process, being able to “go with the flow” as she has put it. I reminded her that the images

come to us in various ways, not necessarily in pictures. They might reveal themselves in sensory information.

Process Journal

In the field of imaginal psychology, there would be no directive about possible categories or topics. Instead, there would be consideration of images from an event or a memory or an unsolvable problem, an area I always found to be rich in images. You would be encouraged to trust the image that emerged; the fact that it emerged at all is the only reason needed, an indication of its primacy, urgency, necessity.

I would not see Bree for a week. The next time I came in to the high school, her counselor Maura came to the office where I was setting up and told me that Bree was “falling apart, racking up absences in her first period class and in math” and there was the danger of being denied credit in those classes. She was routinely coming in late. It was November of her senior year, and Maura feared she might not graduate. This from a girl who had always been conscientious about her academic obligations. Despite her obvious dislike of school, she put a high premium on graduation. Not a good sign.

When I spoke to her on the phone, she was weepy and distraught about school. She felt as if “everyone had given up on her”; no one cared and everyone thought she was just lazy so why should she go to their classes? I was the only one who had called, who seemed to care. “I’m scared that I won’t graduate but at this point I’d rather do that than come into that building.” When I encouraged her to share with me what she thought might be “at the bottom of all of this,” she mentioned that her psychiatrist had abruptly terminated with her and closed her practice. In other words, “no safety net.” A startling admission on her part; regardless of how chaotic her life was, she had been able to say that she needed help. It was Friday; I asked her if she would like to meet with me over the weekend; we could go get coffee and talk.

At 1 o'clock that Sunday afternoon I picked her up. We went to get coffee and sat in my car at a small park near the waterfront and looked out at the water as we talked. It was a damp drizzly day and the sun was peering weakly through the fog. She seemed exhausted. I talked to her about possible alternatives to conventional graduation, all the time stressing that she was going to have to "meet people halfway" if they were going to be able to help her. She was reluctant to do that; she would not "compromise her principles." It was a two-hour conversation. I drove home feeling discouraged about her intractability.

The next day in school we recapped our conversation, and she seemed more amenable to compromise. Additionally, she wanted to "get back to work." Given that she seemed to be "boxing herself into a corner" I thought it might make sense to work with aspects of some of her "fixed" beliefs. I asked her to consider what she "knows and doesn't know" in whatever form came to her. She started a list and said she would finish it at home.

True to her word she arrived for our next session with the finished list. She had also highlighted "key parts" and had chosen the two that caused her the most trouble.

- *I don't know how to get @ love.*
- *Relationships are a shot in the dark*
- *I hate being yelled at.*
- *Usually when I fight with someone I am extremely [sic] articulate and stubborn I don't want to offend or be offended Im [sic] afraid that an argument [sic] will lead to a break up because knowing myself and how little it takes for me to write people off*
- *I can't compromise for me its either my way or his way w/ one of us making a complete sacrifice of what one of us wants in a particular situation*
- *Now that my life patterns have shifted to accommodate our relationship im [sic] scared of how ill [sic] reoperate [sic] after we break up*

- *I'm scared of a broken heart-he told me he may be enlisting and it brought tears to my eyes*
- *I feel like I've been robbed of my independence but willingly but then again I wonder what I'm [sic] going to do when he's not there to support me*
- *I feel a sense of importance when I take care of him when he's sick or in pain.*
- *My friends are making me feel like I need to choose between him and then because they don't like to hang out w/ the both of us but its hard to choose between your best friends and the person you love it's a different kind of love*

When she was done reading her list aloud, I pointed out that some of the listed items were beliefs and some were positions or “stances” she had taken based on a belief. My intention here was to explore the way a seemingly fixed belief may not be as rigid or even “true” as we might think, but it could still be affecting our behavior. When I asked her to “free write” about one of the beliefs on her list, she chose “I can’t compromise.” Wouldn’t the belief underlying this position be compromise is bad? No, she “believed” that she was “unable to compromise.” She did not have a choice. It was still fixed in her mind. I suggested that she also consider the “flip side” of this statement.

For as long as I can remember I've always known exactly what I wanted out of any given situation. I've always had a very clear distinction of what I agreed with and disagreed with and I've always known how to get what I want. Ever since I left elementary school I've been a different person. I think its because my parents divorced when I was in fifth grade. I can remember making packs [sic] with myself to do nothing short of what I want in life because there simply is not enough time to live unhappily like my parents did for so long. Ever since I've had a major problem with authority. I've been kicked out of almost every class ive [sic] been to since middle school. I refuse to kiss a teacher's ass or let them brainwash me into a typical train of thought. Nothing is taken at face value. I always ask questions and they're usually the ones people are to [sic] embarrassed [sic] to voice themselves in fear of offending the teaching or sounding profound. I've always been one to argue and prove a point. When I'm right I know it and under no circumstance do I fold especially if its something I feel strongly about.

The flipside:

Life as I know calls for some kind of compromise [sic] during one time or another in life. So while maintaining your own beliefs like I have you loose [sic] a lot. People look @ you differently and think of you differently. It's hard to get along with teachers because they're threatened by your intelligence. You catch a lot of shit from a lot of people but it can be good because you learn like I did a long time ago not to care what people think and that as long as you are okay with yourself and true to yourself you're untouchable.

When Bree wrote about the “flip side” as she called it, I pointed out that her characterization still veered into the positive. The “pull of the positive” was always evident, always attractive because it seemed to guarantee security, including those things we “paint in a positive light.” I suggested she write about an image from the shadow side, either “real” from experience or metaphorical, one that might capture the feel of “not being willing to compromise.” I was curious about how she would work with images. We had not been there yet; there had been too many distractions and evasive maneuvers.

I could go along like all the other kids [GOD FORBID] and put on a smiling face and sit through yet another pointless period but I don't. I can not do something that in every aspect of it makes me completly [sic] miserable and except [sic] for what it is and do what I need to do to get by. I think I would drive myself insane. Some days I tell myself to suck it up and do the work and disregard the comments but those are the days that make the next day that much more miserable. Like I said before I refuse to be fake I can't be anything short of myself without feeling completly [sic] disgusted with myself. I would rather make huge sacrifices like my education than sit in an endless class and think over and over again how miserable I am.

It was becoming increasingly clear that she fully intended to stop going to her classes, as “insane” as she knew that sounded at this late date. She had reached “the end of her rope” and unless she was willing to work with some adult at the school who was in

a position to help her, she would not graduate. At this point, it looked like a distinct possibility.

Subject Journal-Bree

I had a conversation with her father Gary on the phone Monday night at home. He returned my call from the office here (I suggested he call me at home). He is clearly not aware of the extent of her substance abuse (ironic given his job in the Substance Abuse field); he said they were "two ships that pass in the night." I talked to him about the importance of Bree seeing a therapist to replace the one who terminated with her, that she herself had said that the absence of the therapist might "explain some of these problems." I told him she had also mentioned Seasonal Affective Disorder, something she had talked with her therapist about and even the fact that medication might help with her complexion and her anxiety. He certainly wants her to get her diploma; he also said she tended to be "unrealistic" about the future and supporting herself as a writer. In his mind, this was just another example of her tendency to be "self-centered." There is more than a grain of truth to what he is saying; I sensed defeat in his voice. I know she badgers him relentlessly about his failures as a father; he must be tired too.

Her counselor asked me at lunch the next day if Bree were "having a meltdown." The school personnel were at their wits end trying to figure out what to do with her. I shared the information I had about alternatives to graduation and her regular schedule and cautioned that we all needed to be careful about not enabling her increasingly careless, hostile attitude. The question was: did she have the ability to "suck it up" and go to class for the rest of her senior year? We all doubted it.

Bree and I spent our next session talking. The hardening was underway. There were patterns emerging in her pronouncements: "I won't talk about my feelings, I am afraid of being upset, I don't like being upset, I can't control my feelings, there is a very fine line between when I get upset and when I say "get the fuck away from me." She had written a "letter" to Tommy that she had no intention of sending to him, telling him what she thought about their relationship. She had wondered what would happen if he found it...and he had. Now she was "terrified" about what he might do. Would she give up her

relationship with Tommy rather than talk to him about her feelings? Her immediate answer was yes.

She was trying hard to push me away as well; I told her I could feel that; that I would make it hard for her to do that.

Subject Journal-Bree

She is trying hard to alienate me now. She can be COLD and seemingly heartless. She obviously wanted to say things to Tommy, share her feelings with him, but is deathly afraid of losing control of her own feelings, turning them all into anger. Her emotions feel dangerous to her at this point. She told me that Tommy asked her Are you going to get mad? It is increasingly clear that she uses anger as a shield. She has said repeatedly that she doesn't like to talk to anyone about her feelings, much less let anyone see her cry. Particularly not Tommy. I asked her if she thought the fact that she didn't share her feelings with him might hurt his feelings. Her answer: I don't care, I don't give a shit about that. What she thinks is right. All the time. Phew. How many people are going to stick around for long in the face of that? Here's the paradox: she wants a relationship but she is scared to death of being hurt so she sabotages it before it gets too close. She is working hard to push her dad away, her teachers, even me now. I told her that I would not let her do that; I did call her attention to the fact that she is aiming her venom at me now, and I can feel it. I told her I would do whatever I could to help arrange for another therapist; she should be seeing someone else. I am worried about whether she will "melt down" because the solutions I can offer about how to get her diploma are increasingly difficult and none of them is what she wants to hear.

In our next session she wanted to try to write about her list of belief statements and how "compromise was a double-edged sword" but she couldn't sustain the effort; she was weepy, sniffing and shaky. Would she like me to share what I saw and heard from this list? Overwhelming fear of being emotionally hurt, fear of showing emotion, fear of rejection, hostility toward authority. I had to give her credit; she brightened a bit and said "oh yeah, I recognize those guys." She had kept everyone at arm's length all her life, something she and I had in common, I pointed out to her, using the actual gesture I used to separate my arguing parents when I was a child. The way I saw it, she had been badly

hurt in her life, and this sadness was “an appropriate reaction to what had happened to her.” I would have been more worried if she were continuing to pretend that everything was just fine.

The immediate concern was her diploma. It didn’t look promising without some kind of major accommodation on the part of the school. She didn’t want to make any kind of accommodations (translated: compromises), even if they might benefit her. Life was going to be hard this way. And she would be alone.

This was certainly a transition point, an “opportunity for reorganization” supposedly an opportunity to “embrace ambiguity” and “invite creativity,” Her responses to this situation were not “constructed” as a combination of what she had learned with input from others. Rather, she was defensively and judgmentally shutting out all outside influences. She certainly didn’t “let the inside out and the outside in...”

This was a re-organizing moment for me as well, as I struggled to grasp her crisis. I needed to talk to her in strong terms about this moment as such. By nature it was a vulnerable time...therein lay the opportunity and the danger. What might she like to try to do to work with it? Would she like to work with it creatively? As a writer would? I would hearken back to the writer, for I suspected that she was using a narrow judgmental perspective to define the writer as well, and she needed to be called on that and expand her perspective. I also needed to talk with her counselor and have her take responsibility for the school piece.

Following our conversation, she had a long meeting with Bree. Bree’s father also arrived at the school while they were meeting and Bree agreed to have him join them.

The school psychologist had arranged for a new therapist and her counselor had gotten her into the Marketing Co-op program in order to shorten her day for the rest of the year.

When she appeared at my door, Bree was noticeably calmer. She was not as defensive; she seemed more hopeful. Another turning point: she had allowed adults to help her and had seen that they could, in fact, be helpful. I shared some of what one of my advisors, the poet, had said to me the previous week about “inviting the writing process in, in order to see what it can bear.” We had already spoken about “transitional moments” that could be times of reorganization, opportunities for life to go in one of several directions, both hopeful and scary. Therefore, I had her write a brief statement about her reasons for choosing this event that was “pivotal” in her life.

What Happened?

As long as my mother has been married to Kurt she's been trying to shut out my father, not only from her world but from their (meaning my mother and father) sons [sic] world. I've never been able to stand the fact that she insists on having [younger brother] Michael call Kurt dad. It's something I refuse to stand by and let happen without correction and one night I snapped. I haven't spoken to her since like I said I wouldn't.

What did she need to say about what happened? As Bree was wont to do, she still resorted to narrative and generalities about her feelings, continuing to reinforce the impression of angry authority.

After I left her that night I kept screaming to myself “why do I continue to let her do this to me? Why do I for some reason think things will be different?” I made a pact with myself @ that very moment that I would never let her in again. I was a very upsetting moment for me because I had officially made the jump. I had gone all of my teenage years without a mother basically but this was the last straw and there would be no going back. It was the first time in a long time I had cried so strongly.

After my breakdown came the anger like the calm after a storm except the opposite. I unleashed on her. I told her exactly how I felt in the most honest manner.

But it was exactly what I needed. I learned the definition of separation that night. She will never be a part of me again. She will never be given the opportunity to upset me like she did because she is no longer a part of me. Her right as a mother has been revoked and I hold the control now. Fury has never run so cold within me and it will forever remain that way. No apology will make a difference. Simple words like I'm sorry and I love you can't even begin to touch my hate for this woman. All my negative energy is held behind her name and it will forever remain that way because I will never back down in the pact I made with myself that night.

She added a brief piece about the process of writing in this way.

What I wrote above is the aftermath. The setting in of hatred like concrete slabbed over my heart but lifted off my mind. All the energy that went into a long-awaited result. A finale of hardship and emotional breakdowns finding the cause and removing it from my life no matter the consequence.

She had written a commentary full of cold, rigid language about finality, vintage Bree when she was angry. After some thought, she said that it might “help” to write the story of what happened that night because “I would “have it” in front of me to go back to and look at.” Privately, I held the possibility that once she “laid down the narrative tracks” she might write about what happened that night through her mother’s eyes. Would she be able to approach this subject from a different perspective? What might she learn from the details her mother considered significant?

Process Journal

I am re-reading my notes on alchemy in the Process file. “Interpretation is a drying agent in alchemy.” What Bree will no doubt try to do with her writing about that (last) night with her mother: arrive at finality, rigid “fixed” statements. I need to “apply heat” to this rigidity. I had already come up with a way to do that: invite another perspective. She could begin with narrative; “With the imaginal: everything is simultaneously present and the narrative is a way of getting around.” Could I help her “see” that even her memory of that night was imaginal, composed of images? The goal in alchemy was to “burn, grind the image to get to the encoded essence. Pulverize the image to release its natural creative imagery-go after the creative force of the image.”

Bree had not followed through with any of the details for this new arrangement; her counselor was bitterly disappointed. However, when she came to meet with me later, she seemed almost jaunty. I hadn't seen this positive affect in awhile, perhaps attributable to her new arrangement (which was actually not in effect yet because she had "dropped the ball"). My immediate responsibility was to hold her accountable.

Typically dismissive of school concerns, she was excited to tell me how she used "our" method in putting her project on the reinstatement of the draft together. She took words and phrases from what she was reading, arranged them together in front of her and then wrote "around" them. Writing was always about the choices.

I suggested that she try to finish a narrative about that night in as much detail as she could muster. I offered her another perspective: narrative was a way of moving around in images, which were happening in "simultaneous time." She firmly believed that narrative was necessary in this case, because it "gives me something to work with." I also asked her about the letter she wrote to Tommy. She still couldn't find it, and she didn't want to ask him about it because then she would have to talk to him about what it said.

Bree seemed sullen when I next saw her; I was learning to read her moods from a distance. Once again, she was..."royally pissed" that her counselor had reported her absence from her first period class to her father. Maura and I were telling her the same thing: she was accountable for her choices; she had the responsibility of getting to school on time, no matter what. Otherwise, she could go to summer school for English and then get her diploma in August. She was upset that Maura had "yelled" at her and "screwed things up with her father."

Bree cried easily in those days. Then she tried to use anger to stop her tears because she saw tears as “weak” and “a waste of time, bullshit.” I remembered pushing people away by pretending to have no problems. Years later, as an adult, I finally got sick and realized that I didn’t even know what I felt anymore. For her, writing “takes the place of crying.” It was possible that the act of writing could be a “container” of the emotion; she needed to be careful, however, about the tendency to take the written word as the final word on the subject. It appeared to be a new thought, to be “receptive to the wisdom of the tears.” Perhaps the crying would lessen if she would allow it occasionally. She had used anger to protect herself and keep uncomfortable issues (and people) at arms length for so long. When she said, “that’s just who I am, a bitch,” I felt compelled to respond that I did not think of her as an angry (or weak) person; there was someone else under all of that anger.

Reflexivity Journal

When did I start believing that people would reject me for who I am, for speaking my own truth out loud? In addition, females value being in relationship; therefore, we will put aside our own needs if we perceive that they might compromise whatever relationship we find ourselves in. Paradoxically, this process of becoming more “selfish” seems to require time alone. Way too much to ask of teenage girls?

When I told Bree that I did not see her as weak even though she cries in front of me, I should have said that I see her as human. Thank God she can cry...that she is not the Ice Queen. This all hearkens back to my own question; at what age do we learn that we might be rejected for being human, female, who we are?

Now that the storm had abated, I suggested that we just “keep each other company” for the rest of the day, a phrase that seemed to comfort her. She had not written about this night outside of our session time. “If I have some time on my hands and a choice, why would I write about something that is going to make me be in a bad

mood?" Of course; we need company when we do this. And we need to be heard.

Despite my private doubts, she seemed to see merit in working on this narrative.

Before she left, she read her writing out loud.

They had school that night and the girls were working. I knew my dad wouldn't be home until 9:0 at the earliest because he was teaching. I went online to pass some time and for some weird reason I IM'd [instant messaged] my brother. It wasn't my brother on the name responding back but it was my mother. She asked me how I'd been and I returned all the uniformed questions out of respect and then I had a thought that I wish never came into my mind. It was to visit her that night. I hadn't seen her in awhile and I figured I had nothing to do that night so why the hell not. I got in my car and drove the 5 minutes down the street to her house in [name of subdivision] that screams Bree's college fund every time I step foot in it. Almost like I'm stepping on my own feet. Things went well for the first hour or so. I showed her a thing or two on the computer and even set her up an account on AIM [AOL Instant Messaging] which I came to later regret. After that was all set up my brother had come into the room and was happy/surprised to see me. I saw something out of the corner of my eye. The entire time I was in my old bedroom which is now the computer room that I had been waiting for my brother's presence to say something about. It was a finger painting of his arms and hands stretched out in the formation of a hug and it was addressed to "dad." I asked Michael questions I already knew the answer to, to get him comfortable with the conversation like where he made it and such. The questions slowly started to get more difficult for him and you could see him sway uncomfortably. His eyes shifted and became nervous as I asked him questions about his father. He looked confused and it tore me up inside. She had gotten into his head. He started to get upset as did I. I, for the first time ever with him, did not want to look @ him. I was disgusted w/ my 7 year-old innocent brother because when I looked @ him all I saw was my mother's poisonous words. It made me upset because I had been the innocent child before and I know the betrayal that lies ahead of him and there's not a thing I can do to make it easier on him.

Bree took pride in her ability to make up her mind about people "in 5 minutes."

"As this writing shows you," she had been right about her mother after all and was

"rarely" wrong about anyone. What difference would it make if she were wrong,

anyway? What if she missed out on another perspective that she might find helpful or

interesting? All of these opinions and judgments masquerading as facts in order to make the world a more orderly place?

Reflexivity Journal

I was looking thru my books and came across Marianne Williamson's A Woman's Worth. "More women cry, loudly or silently, every fraction of every moment, in every town of every country than anyone—man or woman—realizes." There you go, Bree...should I read this to you? This is a book about a woman's inner life. "Here we are, our real selves, while in the outer world we are imposters." Well, precisely. Just what I have been thinking about for the last few years. I was an imposter in my own life for virtually all of my adult life. But the balance of power must shift, at least become more balanced, in order to have a life worth living at all.

"We're not sure why we're posing, except we have no clue how not to. We have forgotten the part we came here to play. We have lost the key to our own house...The stress of being away so long from home is hurting us, even killing us. We must not stay away; we must find the key. For until we do we will continue to shrivel—our faces, our breasts, our ovaries, our stories...If we knew how to moan, they would hear us on the moon. Together we will embark on a quest for our own enchantment" (page 5).

We ended the session talking about how her account of this night was an example of something painful and significant that happened that probably had much more emotion in it than she was "allowing" in her writing about it. At what cost? Tears formed in her eyes. I told her that one of my primary goals was to make sure that all of the energy we devoted to this effort of "keeping going" was not at our own expense.

Subject Journal-Bree

So...there is the double-edged sword. The very strategy she is using to protect and defend herself (anger, in this case) is also the potential cause of her undoing. I am also remembering that she said she used writing instead of crying. I need to think about the distancing effect of writing...even as I have a hard time sitting down to write what I think. This distancing is not always positive. In fact, I am more encouraged when I get a visceral (physical) response from the writing process.

The next time I saw her she was excited to tell me about her “important, turning point, transition” weekend. She and Tommy actually had an argument and “yelled” at each other and “it was OK, weird”...as she put it. She had become very quiet in anger “as usual.” He kept asking her about it: “what are you going to do, write about it and then leave it around for me to find?” She and I laughed at this; this boy had a sense of humor and was smart enough to “have her number” as she said. She said she didn’t want to have “this conversation” for all of the usual reasons. However, Tommy persisted... and they didn’t “kill each other.” She even tried to put her hand on his hand; this was an interesting, comforting gesture I wouldn’t associate with her. Tommy was “startled” as *well*.

In her estimation, it all “worked.” As I pointed out to her, he took a risk first and pressed her to talk about her feelings even when he knew she could be the Ice Queen, fully capable of directing her icy blast at. Then, she took a risk and told him what she was feeling without bringing out all of her “artillery.” She did have control over her anger; she had choices of “tools” and she chose not to use some of them. She said it “felt good not to just be on autopilot all the time.”

She also had a “nice” Thanksgiving with a “fairly normal” family who welcomed her. Tommy’s stepmother “actually” liked her; she used her adult “company manners.” She admitted that she would like to belong to that family. By contrast, she had no idea what her mother and father did on the holiday.

Given that we spent the session talking about more positive developments in her life, I hoped she was ready for an “assignment”: Why not re-write the narrative of “that night” from her brother’s perspective...or her mother’s? She looked aghast and wrinkled

her nose in distaste; she would have “no idea how to get inside her mother’s head. She countered with a suggestion that she write it from her stepfather’s perspective; “he was in the other room and is a totally normal guy who should have done something.” This might be a compromise for starters, although I had my doubts and sensed an evasive maneuver. She could prepare by re-reading the account she had written and write an introductory statement about her stepfather.

As often happened with Bree, she arrived for the next session in a different state of mind. She had become “bored” with the “story” of that night. Too much time had elapsed; the original impetus was gone. She wanted to write “a bit about that,” however.

I just couldn't finish the story because I wasn't on the same train of thought I was when I first started writing so the story is basically half done but finished as far as I am concerned. I also came into it with an attitude because I was no Susie sunshine when I was writing it and it definitely [sic] comes through cuz I could really care less about my mother and her never-ending bullshit.

I was gratified that she seemed to be regaining her equilibrium, and the news about her more constructive interaction with Tommy was heartening indeed. Given that she and I might only have one or two more sessions before the holiday break, I suggested that we move into “Phase III,” the more actively collaborative part of the process.

She apologized; she wanted to talk again before we began. It was increasingly clear to me that I was functioning in loco therapist. As usual, she had “a lot on her plate.” Her father announced that they were moving into his girlfriend’s house in February. She was worried about how she would get along with this woman; the potential for “clashing” caused her to worry that she might cause the relationship to break up. “Then dad and I would be homeless or I would be without parents.” I drew attention to her tendency to

expect the worst and commented that she was probably tired of all of this upheaval, whereupon tears formed in her eyes.

She was also “more and more upset” that her girlfriends were making negative comments about her relationship with Tommy. While she thought they might be jealous, they might also help her see things she might not see otherwise. She also was “dreading” her first appointment with a new therapist that afternoon. She was “damned nervous because I never do well with new things, especially people.” Given her anxiety and her propensity to make hasty judgments about people, she was already worried that the first topic was going to be medication, which she adamantly refused to consider.

I listened to her chuckling to herself from time to time as she looked through her writing folder. She noticed that she seemed to write a lot about “force, being forced, and that might have something to do with my problems with authority.” A different perspective, a new kind of feedback was at work. It seemed “funny” to go back and read about some problem that now felt more “solved” where before it was “still there” and “bugging her.” The piece she wrote about the night with her mother made her think that “it’s pretty funny to go back and read what you wrote that was lying.” This was not what I expected her to say. That so much of this was a “tough guy routine,” all an act.

The next time I saw her, Bree was subdued; of course I had to ask her about her first meeting with the therapist because the Vice-Principal had already advised me that it hadn’t gone well. Bree felt she “had no choice but to make a snap judgment” because “the woman wrote things in a notebook and said ummm a lot.” However, there was a point she wanted to make that had to do with the work she and I were doing. She said that the hardest part of starting over with a new therapist was having to “tell the stories

for like the millionth time.’ It appeared as if Bree gave her the “hostility act” from the first minute. “After awhile she just didn’t want to deal with me.” All of the usual defense flags were flying in full glory; no one was going to tell her what to do, fear of new things, fear of being rejected or let down by adults. She was still worried and afraid that her mother would “fake Tommy out” into thinking that she was the perfect mother. However, she would not give up because she “wanted to find out where all of this was going.” She had realized that her friend Tess was “lying about all of her stuff, all those problems; all of that energy spent trying to help her was...for what?” What if you took yourself as seriously? Or, as she put it, what if I saw myself as someone who had problems? What reasons might Tess have for lying in her writing?

It was the day before the holiday vacation: our last session. She had decided not to go to her second appointment with the “whacko therapist,” but she was uncertain how to explain this decision to her father who “never listened” to her and only wanted her to go to therapy so she would be “off his back.” I gave her some suggestions of things to say to her father so that he could hear her; if she wanted to be heard, she needed to talk in such a way that her audience could listen and hear what she was saying. This might mean that she had to tailor what she was saying to her father’s way of hearing, not the other way around. I reminded her of our talk about “appropriate” anger and depression and how anger can also be used as a “cover-up,” that there are usually other emotions underneath the presenting one. Her father appeared to be reacting to the anger instead of to her. She was prone to say that he “deserved it”; translated that meant that, as her father, “he should be able to deal with it,” persist in trying to understand her, should “care” about her. “But he’s only human, you know.” She became weepy again when I

asked her what caring looked like. “How would I know that? I’ve never seen it.” I pointed out that she clearly had an idea because she was so quick to define her father as “uncaring.” I knew she understood what I was saying; tears came when she thought about being cared for. For example, what would he say about your therapist problem if he were caring? “He would say that I will help you find another one.” Could she write a letter to him? So he could just read the words without the attitude? The way Tommy did?

I knew now that “shifting gears” would not alarm her; I was also concerned about closure and our temporary termination and wanted to end on a note of empowerment. After all, we had “extra” time because she was not going to her appointment. Would she talk to me this time about what she had learned from and observed in reviewing her writing?

Reading aloud after I have written something is scary at first. It’s finalized and it has to be true. Lying on paper can be done but not out loud. There’s something about hearing your words in your own voice that makes you catch yourself lying...

You asked some really good questions that I wish a therapist would ask me: who do you think you are...how do you feel about yourself...how do you think others see you? These questions made me look at myself from different angles, see that I changed and shifted, did not have to be stuck in one place.

The urge to lie is huge; ...but not with trust, if I trust the person who is reading what I write or talk to. If I want to try to tell the truth, it’s so tiring, a draining process. It takes all the energy I have and I am still not sure I have done it. I had to tell the truth when I knew I would read it out loud because someone would be saying something back to me about what I said.

Mostly it felt good not to have to act all the time, that finally, there’s no need for the act, you can say what’s really going on and it drains out. If there is no judgment you don’t have to spend all the energy hiding it.

This writing process is incredible...it helps me with my ability to separate the good from the bad, business from pleasure, feelings from what happened. Writing helps me separate from it...I can hold it and there is no need to replay it over and over in my mind, I can just get it out and move on.

Sometimes I want people to read my journal so they will think more like me; then they could help themselves...also to poke fun at life...loosen up, don't take life so seriously...I don't write for an audience while I'm writing but later I pick who will read it. I need to have a record of things so I can go back to it later, so it's not lost.

The last time I came in to the high school to pick up some materials, Bree sought me out.

True to form, she wanted one last word...in writing. She handed me a page from her notebook. "Here's an early Christmas present."

I think that this process is very well designed for people who are serious about their writing. People who are tired of writing things without substance can look at this process as pulling inspiration out from within. I read this quote once that said something along the lines of "you can't move forward unless you are okay with your past." Which I believe this process helped me start to do, in ways that my therapist couldn't touch. Now I think much more carefully about the words I write and when I find myself stuck not knowing what to write about, I think back to an exercise we did and I've been surprised with the outcomes. However you have to be willing to be truthful with yourself through your writing or else the process won't work. Thank you for keeping me company.

Holly and Serena

I met Holly and Serena together on a bright cold February morning in the winter of their junior year at the high school. They had heard about my research study from their English teachers, who had suggested they meet with me. I told them that I hoped to work with teenage girls who had some experience using the writing process to explore personal experiences and who might be interested in learning more about an imaginal writing process. Holly told me she needed no time to think about it. She had been writing “forever” and thought this would be a “good break” from all of the “school writing” she had to do that consumed most of her time. She had little time for “personal writing” and said that when she did sit down to write about her life, she just seemed to be “going in circles with the same old stuff.” Serena, always the more subdued of the two, added that she felt she needed to “get past” some of the things that were “holding her back in her writing.” They had one “key” question for me: would I consider working with them as a group of two?

I was particularly interested in learning more about the function and value of various forms of feedback to the writers and the significance of their relationship to their audience. Here was an opportunity to compare how the girls worked alone and with a peer audience. I had worked with groups and pairs of students on many occasions for counseling and mediation purposes; therefore, I was keenly aware that it would be difficult to anticipate whether the presence of another girl would be an asset or a liability to the process. If they were willing to give it a try, so was I. And so it began.

Therefore, I came to know each girl against the backdrop of the other. Both of them were academically talented Advanced Placement and Honors students with full

schedules and no study halls. However, they had one class period in common during the day, physical education, and their “gym” teacher graciously allowed them to meet with me during her class. They were close friends, yet their differences were readily apparent. Their friendship had developed out of their common love of writing and “on-going disgust” for the “relentless drama of the high school social scene.” They belonged to a small group of girls who gathered at each other’s houses throughout high school on Friday nights to watch movies and later, when drivers’ licenses were obtained, went on “crazy driving trips.” Each of them lamented her “limited” social life but chose not to go to parties because “then it would be impossible to avoid the drinking and drugs.” They took their National Honor Society “pledge” very seriously, even though they were frustrated that everyone else “just blows it off and no one does anything about it.”

Holly was always moving. She was the athlete, a long-distance competitive runner who was also a class officer and working furiously to achieve valedictorian status in her senior year. Of medium height, she was slim and toned, with an olive complexion, large dark-lashed brown eyes and long shining black hair. She smiled often, a bright white smile that flashed across her face. She radiated energy, always speaking in rapid bursts and punctuating her sentences with laughter. Holly carried her “life” around with her in a large pink and black tote bag filled with books, notebooks, assorted papers and pens. She usually wore stylish fitted jeans with a blouse and sweater or an athletic suit, sweatshirt, and sneakers if she were headed out for practice or a meet.

The contrast was striking. Serena was quiet; shy and almost reticent in the first few weeks. A “hopeless romantic,” Holly talked and Serena listened, occasionally interjecting a comment. “Not at all athletic,” she was also of medium height, slightly

plump with long wavy brown hair, green eyes and a sweet smile. She wore wire-rimmed glasses most of the time that suited her. Serena favored feminine clothes: ruffled or Victorian style gauze blouses in pastel colors, blue jeans and jewelry. She wore an assortment of necklaces, bracelets and rings and loved to “create outfits.” Her writing was “the most important part of her life” and she dreamed of a career as a poet or novelist. When I met her she had just begun writing “yet another Gothic fantasy tale” which she used to divert her attention from “things that annoyed her at home and in school.” Her parents had divorced when she was sixteen, and she chose to live with her “angry, unresponsive” father because she feared she might never see him if she lived with her mother. She had also lived in that house her entire life and didn’t want to change school in her junior year. Her father continued to speak about her mother angrily to “anyone who would listen.” Holly was the more animated of the two; lively and intense. However, I came to know that Serena’s still waters ran deep; she was careful and deliberate about everything she said and did. They were joking about the yoga class they were missing in their gym class on the first day we met (and I felt a twinge of guilt because I was depriving them of an experience I felt was beneficial) and their opposing positions were illustrative of the difference in their world view. Holly “hated” yoga because it was “too quiet” while Serena “loved” the peace of just having time to yourself.” Both of them were obviously intelligent and studious, determined to “have a life beyond these four walls.” I told them that I would continue working with them as a pair “to see how it goes” but reserved the right to work with them individually at a later date if that seemed appropriate. They were particularly excited about the prospect of contributing to a collection of writings for other girls, echoing Bree’s claim that they

would love to see how other girls wrote about what they had gone through, and “there was never enough help with personal stuff, especially from someone who’s been there.”

In the early days I worked on building rapport with each of them and shared some of the thinking and experiences that lead me to do this study. I was intrigued by the notion of expanding on traditional journal writing practice in order to see how a more interactive writing process might become a vehicle for gaining access to additional perspectives, including their own. This intrigued them, in light of what they observed as a common tendency among girls to “overanalyze everything to the point of exhaustion” without making any headway toward “fixing what they started with.” I told them I would be asking them to write about themselves so that I could get to know them and how they presented themselves in writing and that we would discuss some of their discoveries. They were intensely curious about whether a “self” was “a fixed thing that developed through stages” or “whether it existed at all.” They both alluded to having “plenty of material for this kind of writing.” I told them, as I told Bree numerous times, we would “keep each other company.” They would read their writing aloud, so that it could be heard and responded to. Holly looked alarmed when I said this; was it my imagination?

The following week, on the day of our first “official writing session,” Holly stopped in only briefly, disappointed that she had to go to an unplanned meeting. However, she told me she had a plan to “look over” some recent poems and email them to me. She “warned” me that she tended to write about her “dark side” in order to “keep happy” in her “real life.”

Serena

Consequently, Serena and I were left to work alone together. She had written two poems that were “background” and seemed to come from “that part of myself that is never listened to.” Both of them had been written the night after she observed her boyfriend hugging another girl they both knew. Even though Serena professed to not be alarmed it “obviously made an impression because I had to write about it.” Her poems rarely had titles.

**Sometimes I feel like I have to scream
To get anyone to notice,
To get you to care.
I would have to break down in tears
To get even a glimpse of concern.
So maybe you should know that I do,
Every night I do,
But no one knows.
So will that change anything?
Will it make you care?
This emptiness has swallowed me whole
And I have to push everyone away
Before it swallows them.
Because I know now
I was meant to be alone,
And even if you wanted to,
You couldn't save me.
And the one thing I can't tell you
Is that I'm so afraid,
I'm afraid that I'm right.
And I'll have to lose you too.**

I asked her to write briefly about what had “inspired” or “triggered” the poem. When she finished writing the explanatory note, I had her read that aloud first, before I heard the poem.

The basis for this poem was that I was just feeling like nobody really cared about me. They all noticed that something was wrong with me, but no one asked what it was and nobody tried to do anything to make me

feel better. I sort of felt like I had to be unhappy-that it was just part of who I was, and no matter what happened, nothing could change that.

She thought they “worked better as a pair”; the second poem was re-typed and without a title as the first one had been.

I know something is there, it has to be,
 But I can't feel it.
 I'm too numb, too cold to let it reach me.
 I let this dark shadow engulf me,
 Keep me from getting close,
 From saying anything to save myself.
 And I could,
 One word could revive my soul,
 But my mouth stays shut.
 And every second of every day
 It cuts deeper and deeper. It eats away at what little is left,
 And no one can see that I'm bleeding, dying.
 It kills me. Every day it kills me.
 And I can't stop it.
 I've always been wrong,
 Thinking I could escape it,
 Because I never will.
 I've been leaning against a glass wall my whole life,
 Just praying that somebody would crack it,
 But you've barely made a scratch.
 The barricade is too thick, too resistant,
 Too strong to give in to you.
 It's never shown a sign of breaking before,
 And why should this time be any different?
 And nothing good is waiting on the other side.
 I'm a cancer.
 I could spread and consume the light from everyone around me,
 The way mine was pulled from me,
 If I ever really had one. And you can't bring it back.
 No one can.
 And I have no one to blame but myself.

Serena was intrigued by the way in which a “seemingly mundane” situation, one that “probably happens to millions of high school girls every day,” could “lead to this

whirlpool of emotion.” She said this often happened to her, that she would start thinking about “some small thing” and then “get sucked into all these other feelings.”

I had been going out with my boyfriend for about a month and one morning I noticed that he hugged my friend Kira but wasn’t even standing next to me. Normally this wouldn’t be a problem-Kira hugs everyone all the time. There was just something about it that bugged me. Maybe I just wanted some attention. It wasn’t that I didn’t want her hugging him, it was more like I wanted to be hugged first. And thinking this one little thing over made me insecure about a lot of things.

I knew that her own thoughts and feelings were the impetus for much of her poetry. Therefore, I was curious about how she would explain what happened when she turned to writing to explore some of these situations. “It can get pretty tough,” she allowed. “I can find myself sinking further and further into what I could call a depression. I think that’s why I started writing those Gothic things. They were personal and entertaining at the same time; they were dark but just enough removed from me that I could snap out of it.” I noted the presence of the image of the glass wall in this second poem and the prevalence of emotion-laden language.

Holly and Serena

Holly rejoined us in the next session and her presence in those first weeks became a significant obstacle to self-disclosure. Serena remained unwilling to read aloud or talk about personal matters while she was there. It was mutual; her reluctance inhibited Holly. As time went on, it also became apparent that Serena used her writing as a vehicle to reveal her thought process and often didn’t feel as if she had anything to add out loud to what she had written. Holly, on the other hand, preferred jaunty, almost falsely

cheerful conversation that often effectively served to distract herself (and others) from the seriousness of the issues she touched upon in her writing. Although we persevered for several weeks because I was still getting to know them and their work together was friendly and supportive (and they continued to generate writings of a background, introductory nature), ultimately I made the decision that it would be more appropriate to work with them individually.

I met with both girls together in our next session. True to her word, three poems had arrived from Holly via email the night before. Two of them had been written for her writing class; the third, entitled “Lies, the Truth, and Guilt” was about “personal things.”

Stop pretending nothing is wrong
 Don't act like everything's fine
 Because it's not
 And I know it's not.
 I can see it in your actions; hear it in your voice.
 It's not going to be alright...happy endings happen in fairy tales,
 And I have no magic wand to wave that will make it all better.
 I can think of happier times when things were normal
 I don't remember exactly when everything changed-
 But it did.
 And now I'm stuck here, unable to leave
 Living in fear and guilt
 That I'm making it worse.
 It hurts too much to accept the truth
 So even I pretend it's alright, nothing's wrong
 Even though I know that's a lie.
 In ten years I'll look back and get mad at myself
 For things I said and did
 Because they sting you, I know-they sting me too.
 But it's only because I can't take it
 Neither of us makes it any easier
 Only harder
 Because being kind and loving would feel awkward
 And it hurts too much to accept reality
 But when you're gone

**I won't look back on now
And be happy or fulfilled.
I'll be empty.**

And I'm sorry.

(Alright, that one was to my mom because she's sick and stuff, and we don't get along. There was no one event that prompted that one; i just wrote it.)

I had read all three of them and the brief explanatory notes (written in lavender) she had attached when I received them, prior to the session. Even though it was early in our work together, I asked her if she felt comfortable reading this last one aloud because I hoped to “separate” from school assignments. She laughed nervously. As she was wont to do, she adroitly changed the subject by putting her sunglasses on and making a seemingly offhanded remark about how being tired makes you “nutty.”

I allowed it to distract me for the moment; I was reluctant to press her at that stage of our relationship. In fact, I would not fully appreciate the magnitude of this disclosure, so early in my work with her, until months later. In retrospect I have tried to understand how this happened. I had asked her counselor and teacher for any relevant information they might provide; all they knew was that her mother was “sickly” and Holly “didn't seem to have much in common” with either of her parents. My “mistake” was in assuming they had all of the pertinent information. I should have known better. In my experience, most school counselors, given their huge caseloads and limited, fragmented time within the confines of the school day, operated with a deficit of knowledge and information and rarely had time to establish the rapport that would support significant disclosure, particularly with students like Holly and Serena who were loathe to bring their personal problems into school. Therefore, a classic miscommunication was taking place

in front of me. As she told me months later, Holly thought I had been told and already knew what was “going on at home,” although she had to admit that she had never talked about it to any adult at school. She also took responsibility for her reluctance to read or talk about it “in those days.” Even though she didn’t want to read aloud, she also liked having Serena there in the first few weeks; she “could feel the power of her support.”

On this day, I hoped to have them do some writing “in company” for the first time. I asked each of them to write “about themselves, some aspect of their current life that would tell me about how they go through their days.” They would have the choice to read aloud or not. Even though both girls devoted “hours” to writing on the computer, each of them “loved” to write “by hand” and never saw this as a limitation or hindrance to the process. Holly usually finished first; she did everything “as fast as possible.” Serena, on the other hand, wrote slowly and deliberately, almost as if she were savoring every word and giving them her full attention. The fact that there were two of them in one time-limited session became another obstacle; for Holly there was too much “down time” while she waited and Serena didn’t always finish her thoughts.

Serena’s piece, which she declined to read aloud, was “too mundane” but “a classic example of how I can take something minor and go on and on about it.”

This may sound stupid but it’s something that’s really been bugging me latterly and is one of the things that is causing me a lot of stress. There’s a person who I sit next to at lunch, who isn’t really my friend but is kind of in my group of friends. It’s more like he’s just there. And he’s also in two of my classes. His name is Nick, and he has to be the creepiest person I’ve ever met. Sometimes he’ll just randomly stare at a person, like across the lunch table at my friends Candace or Joan and it’s so creepy. He doesn’t blink, and doesn’t look away, even if you know that he’s staring at you. The thing that really bugs me is that if he’s talking to a

girl, he's basically hitting on her. It's just the way he says things. And I'm pretty sure he does it more with me than anyone else. I hate it. A few months ago everyday my friends would jokingly tell me to go out with him because they were convinced that he was in love with me. It's really disturbing. And I've noticed that he does it more now that I have a boyfriend, and it really pisses me off. It's like he loves irony or something. I've been trying to get my boyfriend to come down and "kill" him for me at lunch but it never works out. Every day I think, "can't he at least hit on someone who's single?" My boyfriend made me a duct tape bracelet and I wear it everyday mainly to convey an "I'm taken" message to Nick, but he doesn't get it.

Holly told us she "started out" writing about her AP History exam and "then the subject just went from there."

I need to change myself.

I was up until friggen 12:30 reading history, all because I was too stupid to read it before. And when people ask why I'm so stressed or whatever and I say "history," I feel pretty pathetic. It's only one class. I know that. But that doesn't help. I don't know why I put everything on such a huge scale; if I do badly on one test, it's like I'm going to fail at life. But people don't understand that my standards are so high. I won't be happy unless everything works out the way I want it to. CONTROL I don't want to have life be the same in 10 years. I don't want to have to worry about money or family. I want the road to smooth out, and I want to be happy. I want the stress & anxiety to somehow disappear or evaporate.

Of course I know that that's not going to happen. I know life is hard. I know more than people think I do. Nothing's perfect. People keep telling me that it'll all work out in the end, that everything is "gonna be OK." Well, guess what? I know that's a lie. We have no guarentee [sic] of anything, and I think that that's what scares me. The fact that I excel in high school means nothing. I could still suck in the real world. I could still be unhappy or have a horrible job that pays next to nothing and that I hate. This isn't a fairy tale or a movie, it's life. There are no fairy godmothers or ruby slippers or magic wands that can make everything "all better." I don't even know if I want things to be fixed, because everything that happens helps define my character, and strengthens or changes me. AMBIVALENCE There is no happy ending or certain path to follow like in Candyland. After

next year I'm on my own, choosing my own way. There's no certainty of anything.
But sometimes I wish there was.

Holly

I saw Holly alone in our next session: Serena was on a field trip. For the sake of rapport, we compared notes about traveling in Europe. She loved “how much slower everything is, that they don’t think the world ends at the borders; they are more “open. They speak many languages. They believe in enjoying moments, life, instead of being so focused on “getting ahead.” She chuckled when she told me she could “breathe” there.

Holly and I always enjoyed talking with each other. As was often typical of only children, she was easy and articulate with adults, and her conversational arts served her well in what I came to see as her on-going effort to avoid more personal issues. I liked her immediately, as I soon discovered the adults in the high school did; she was bright and energetic and cheerful and smart. However, I sensed a dark sadness and confusion I had to make a conscious effort to remember and keep in front of me, given this sunny exterior. This was “hard work” I told her I remembered all too well from my own high school experience. The relentless cheeriness: what was it hiding? Why so much effort invested in appearing carefree and happy all the time? She said she wrote to keep her dark side in “that place.” Perhaps this work of ours would be a bridge for her between these two worlds she struggled so hard to compartmentalize. She told me many times in the months we worked together that she appreciated “how slowly” I let her work. I didn’t force her to read aloud or “dig too deep” in her writing until she was “more ready.” A bond was developing between us. She “let me in” a bit at a time, and I was careful to let her have that measure of control.

As preparation for having her write more descriptively about herself, to further strengthen our growing rapport, and to model the processes of written disclosure and reading aloud, I read parts of a piece I had written called “Images of Self” to her.

I was born to parents about whom it could be understood why they came together; it was left to me and my brothers to understand why they could not stay together. My father lived in his head and my mother had children instead of plans for herself. In the parlance of the 1950's, they were a charming couple, well-suited. My father tells everyone that he was the first father allowed in the delivery room at Mt. Zion hospital in San Francisco. He likes a good story, particularly one that features him as the subject. They were divorced when I was four.

The self is built on stories, other people's versions and perspectives of the years before memory reveals its stored images. I'm told I was a “good” child; I slept through the night, was smiley, cheerful, healthy, curious. The year my parents gave up on their marriage: I hear shouting and screaming. I stand in between them, referee with my arms extended, to hold them apart; the other choice to cover my ears. I memorize my father's new phone number and call him once, when I find my mother on the bathroom floor and can't wake her up.

I went to thirteen schools in eleven years, learning to re-invent myself, hide my feelings, and gain approval. My teachers loved me (except Miss Osbourne in the fourth grade because I couldn't get long division and I was taller than she was). I was a conscientious and diligent student, strong-minded, outspoken, articulate. I made friends everywhere I went, but never stayed long enough to become known. I made it look easy; who knew that I came home to an empty house, cooked and cleaned and bathed and tucked in my brothers while my mother worked two jobs and began to drink. I left high school after my junior year without the diploma they refused to give me to go across the country to Bates. My mother followed me. She took another overdose of pills that fall; my godmother said “it's her life, not your responsibility,”

I spoke to her about how images might come to her, perhaps not just as “pictures or memories” but also as sensory information or metaphor. This made sense to her; she “had a hard time thinking in pictures.” Her first writing about her “self” was oriented around the metaphor of play doh.

I am like play-doh.

Pink, maybe. Not orange. I hate orange. And yellow. Yellow's too bright and cheery. Green reminds me too much of plants. Red isn't good for play-doh. So I'm pink.

I can be bent and twisted into shapes and statues. I'm mad at home, depressed sometimes because of it, happy around certain people, annoyed w/ others. Whenever I watch a movie or read a book I usually act like the main character. Without meaning to. I become them, take on their personality. I have a great skill of memorization. But I could never be an actress. My stage fright takes over. I used to be fine in front of crowds, but now I'm not. I'm better at being the screenwriter, not the movie star. I am a drama queen, though. I think I should have been a princess but that would make my mom a queen, which she isn't. Bruja, I call her. Witch in Spanish. She's changed and so have I. I'm not a lovable, affectionate girl anymore, and she's not my mom. I don't like her very much. She annoys me more than Napoleon, mosquitoes, messy writing, bad hair, fur coats, and fat people who eat pizza all put together. I love Spanish.

Reflexivity Journal

There have been a number of "Subjective I's" engaged today: the one abandoned/rejected by her father, the one with mixed feelings about her mother's life, the one everyone thought was happy and cheerful all the time, the one silently screaming 'what does it take to get your attention???' And then there is role-playing. The roles we play.

Holly chose not to read this piece aloud, instinctively wary about how much more deeply she would be immersed in the emotions of the piece if she were to hear the sound of her own voice bringing these thoughts and feelings forth. I acknowledged this objective in our work but did not press her. Therefore, I did not read her piece until after she left, which precluded a discussion of it during the session. Holly and I were already engaged in a delicate "dance," and I had to vigorously monitor the process by which the lead kept switching back and forth. I asked her to consider continuing this piece at home. This was not a "required homework assignment"; I wondered aloud if she might be more likely or willing to work outside of session time if she had started something "with company." As it turned out, and unlike Serena, she hardly ever wrote for our sessions

outside of “company time.” Instead, she always reported being “too busy” with her overwhelming academic, athletic, and leadership obligations.

Process Journal

There is a “bonding” that takes place over the sharing of self and the ways in which the shared selves overlap. Particularly for girls? Because self is relational? I don’t think it is just a “girl thing.” Even though self is developed at least partly “in relation,” this is more about getting people “ready” to reveal things about themselves in their own time and ways. I can facilitate the process of revealing self and exploring aspects of self that have never been explored but that they may be aware of not far below the surface and then those aspects of self that may be “buried” deep but are still “at work” on their behavior anyway.

This is the paradoxical fragility of the resilient response to life experience. Each of these girls was “edgy.” The coping strategy: distract yourself. These girls were complicated, many-layered. They didn’t allow themselves to feel; they bracketed their feelings or tried to contain the feel of chaos in their writing. I knew I would have to deal with their emerging reluctance to break through the protective layers they had created. At times they might even feel worse than they had allowed themselves to feel before. The fact that they would feel anything at all might be a new experience. Could they enter an imaginal world with their writing in which they would encounter “what happened” as images to engage? There, these events were not “real” in the conventional sense, perhaps not as terrifying. At the very least, they could be encountered, responded to. There would be no moving forward without that effort.

Serena

I had time alone with Serena during the next session. From her piece written that day, I would learn more about her “divided” self.

I guess I'm a person who has a somewhat split personality. Part of me knows exactly what it wants in life, the other part has no idea. Part of me has every single detail planned out-what college I'll go to, what books I'll write, what my house will look like. The other part just stares at the future in complete horror and hides in a corner. I try to blend the two together, to have some idea of where I'm going, but to be open to change. But usually it turns out that I'm either one or the other. I'm hardly ever both.

Sometimes I completely hate myself. I hate who I am, how I act, what I look like. I hate how one tiny thing can go wrong and I'll be depressed for the whole day. I hate how I usually don't know what's wrong with me; I'll just be depressed for no reason.

Serena had responded to "appropriate" feelings of confusion and ambivalence about her future by internalizing this "split" as a negative, damaged aspect of herself. The work of "learning how to learn" from her feelings was underway; it would be slow going.

Holly

Holly arrived for the next session with a piece she had "added on" to what she had written in the previous session. She had carried the play-doh metaphor further; this time the subject seem to move farther and farther away from her and became more impersonal as she switched to the word "you." There was also the distancing effect of the rather clumsy attempt to be humorous in the first paragraph.

I am a user of words. I can twist and contort them into whatever I want. I am powerful, dominating. The pen is mightier than the sword, they say. But swords can chop off your heads. Pens can't unless for some reason you have a huge pen and a small head. The you're screwed. I love languages. English is my favorite only because I am fluent in it. It's always been my favorite subject in school. Especially last year, when I had a teacher who was crazy. And I love Spanish. Not just the language; everything. I want to grow up & be Spanish. But you can't change your heritage. That's probably one of the only things you can't change about

yourself. You can change, your hair, go on a diet, wear new clothes, hate what you loved before—but no matter what you'll always be the middle child in an Irish family or, in my case, the only child who has a mix of parents.

Personal references were still embedded in the piece: love turned to hate and her mixed feelings about her mother.

She wanted to “write more about herself” because she thought she had not said everything she wanted to say but had “run out of time at home.” I dared to be encouraged that she was willing to share more of herself.

I am obsessive, OCD about everything. I can't just let things go, nr not finish something I've started. Giving up shows weakness, a characteristic which I've banned myself from. I hate being wrong. I hate that feeling of failure and disappointment . I hate knowing I could have done better. Success, in my eyes, is at a higher level that [sic] most people's. I need to excel at everything. That's why I'm one of those people who does everything...But, I have to do it well. Running, for example. I started out being pretty bad then worked until I was at the top of the team & a captain. And my grades—I didn't settle for anything less than the best. I never have and I never will. The perfectionist in me is ever-present and will never leave. But I don't want it to, because I like succeeding. And I like being better than people; I can't help it. I know that I'm smarter & faster & achieve more than some people. I'm not perfect; I know that. There is no perfection. Never has there been, & never will there be. I'm not looking for perfection; I don't even know what I'm looking for. But I keep reaching and stretching my limits...and I hope that I don't stretch too far and break.

I was a good tree climber when I was little. I remember my neighbors would throw our Beanie Babies up in trees, hoping they'd get stuck. Climbing trees was pretty much the only athletic thing I was good at. I didn't (& still don't) have much hand eye or hand foot coordination. But now I'm a runner. An athlete. And it's weird, because I've found that most runners are a lot like me—we all push ourselves and try as hard as we can. We're all good students, for the most part, and the majority of us are individualistic. I think that's why I like to run—you have actual numbers to tell you how much you've improved. And you don't need to depend on anyone else. How I run is up to me and me alone. I don't have to worry about anyone but myself. I do, of course, but it's not like soccer or baseball or other more team-like sports.

I hate yellow. I'm staring at something yellow and I don't like it. It used to be my favorite color, back when I was carefree & happier. Now I like darker colors. I don't like orange, either. Orange is weird.

I am a star. Always burning, shining, even when people don't see. Too hot to touch, to get close to. Made up of millions of little things burning and fizzing and exploding. Not completely understood. Used as an image of success, like a gold star on top of a paper in first grade or some sport's star of the season. Misrepresented.

Holly was never at rest, never comfortable with herself, always setting the bar higher, “dancing” faster and faster, climbing higher and higher. She was able to acknowledge the “misrepresentation” that was a defining undercurrent in her behavior, even as she depicted it in terms of the star metaphor, the vulnerability of being that visible, prone to burn out after a fire blazed too bright.

Holly and Serena

It was Final Exam week; the length of the periods had been extended and we had more time to “write and think and feel and write.” This was the last session in which they worked together with me. Serena told us about an idea for a story she wanted to write: a vampire tale that would “represent” her life. They were both relieved that summer vacation was coming, an opportunity to “get out of stuck mode.” They were interested to learn that Progoff found the practice of making regular entries in the Daily Log to be an effective “warm-up” routine, a prelude to writing about “deeper things” from an imaginal perspective.

The next writing of the session was an “introductory” entry in the Period Log, a brief time limited description of the Present Moment. I asked them to consider the “Now” of their lives, the most recent relevant past as it moved into the present. They could describe the main inner and outer events that came to them when they reflected on the period and recalled its primary aspects. The focus and starting point was always the

present moment in time. They were to place themselves between the past and the future in the particular situations that were at issue in their lives. These questions might be helpful.

- *Where am I now in my life?*
- *What events mark it off?*
- *How far back does it reach?*
- *What have been the main characteristics of this recent period?*
- *Do you recall any dreams, strange/uncaanny events, inspirations, illnesses, misfortunes?*

I suggested that they sit “in the silence” and feel the inner movement of their recent experience without judgment, to “just observe” thoughts come and go and wait for them to return in the form of image, some sensory experience or a metaphor.

Holly’s entry took the form of a list of “moods, memories, attitudes and what caused them.”

- Post Europe
- Eiffel Tower
- AP test...over
- Prom...over
- Jr. Year...almost over
- Drama
- Change
- new clothes
- laziness/apathy/senioritis
- thoughts/fears about the future
- home
- yearbooks
- bad weather
- random mood swings/feelings about people
- too much food
- end of track
- birthdays
- livejournal entries

- can't find my Evanescence CD
- friendships
- daydreams
- stucco
- No more OC

Serena's entry, on the other hand, developed as a paragraph.

I'm going through a transition period in my life right now, and have been for the past few months. I'm trying to change myself for the better. I'm trying to accept myself and be able to like who I am. I think it's because being in a relationship is something so strange to me. I'm not used to expressing my feelings and being open with someone. I haven't ever really been able to love myself, so having to think that somebody else does is beyond me.

Both girls were struck by the difference in form; they had previously thought of form as "automatic rather than a choice, just something that happened."

"Speaking of insights," said Holly, "I have just had another one." In response to their questions, I had been telling them more about what had motivated me to conduct this study; I was interested in going beyond the limitations of traditional journal writing. Holly asked me if I had heard of something called "livejournal.com," a website she and Serena visited regularly where people, usually teenagers, posted entries for others to read and respond to. Holly was beginning to see that the "back and forth" that happened on this website among writers was obviously meeting the need for feedback. Most but not all of the writers were female "as much as you can ever tell on the Internet."

I asked them about the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of writing experience as they perceived them. "It can be empowering to get a response, like you made sense and people out there care about you." However, the experience was also potentially hurtful. Serena said, "I would be devastated if no one wrote back. If there is

no response, *that* would be worse than sitting alone in my room writing suicidal thoughts.” How does one go about providing feedback? I asked them. That gets “tricky.” If they knew the writer, they had to be “careful because everyone else and their friends also read whatever you write back.” Serena said that even though she was “dying for a response” when she wrote on livejournal, she hardly ever wrote a response to another writer because she didn’t know what to say and wouldn’t want to “make a mistake and cause even more trouble.” They also affirmed the potential for “high drama that carries over into school the next day” when writers “go off” on people or “rant” about subjects and “get everyone else all riled up.” I took this as an opportunity to make another point: it was obvious that having an *audience*, with its inherent opportunity for dialogue, was critical to the success of this website. We would be “exploring other approaches to having a dialogue” in our work together over the summer.

As this last session of their junior year drew to a close, we exchanged email addresses, and I said I would contact them to make arrangements to meet with them the following week. Much as they enjoyed working together, there were no protestations about continuing separately; we had all come to recognize that it was time to undertake independent journeys. Thanks to this conversation, I had more pieces of a puzzle that I had not been able to assemble. I knew from Holly and Serena that “most adults were probably unaware that livejournal even existed” and were “definitely unaware of how much it causes problems in school.” Despite the potential for “endless drama,” the girls “lived” on that website; during the summer it would be their “lifeline.”

Serena

By prior arrangement, I worked with Serena first, and the office we had been using in the Guidance Suite was available. Both she and I could sense the “formality” of this first independent session. Any distractions attributable to Holly’s presence were removed; would she be more amenable to reading aloud? How might her writing change? I would learn that it was hard to read Serena. Her facial expressions were carefully guarded; she revealed almost nothing about what she was thinking or feeling. At times, she seemed almost bored, as if she were being patient while I explained things. However, this was never the case, as I found out from asking her directly. She would often mention how hard she found it to express what she was thinking or feeling “outwardly for other people to see.” In fact, this tendency to “create a mask” was one of the reasons she wanted to participate in this study, as would be revealed in her writing about her goals.

On this first day of our “new journey,” I reminded her that this process was also a collaboration. Therefore, I would have her “warm up” with a five-minute entry in her Daily Log that included words or phrases about the most recent period of time in her life. She was to make no effort at chronological order or judgment of the content, just “follow what presented itself.” I reminded her that I would not ask her read this entry aloud but would ask her to write and read aloud about the process. She always knew that I would be reading the Daily Log entries because I kept copies of everything the participants wrote. I include the bulleted list here with her response.

- Went shopping with my mom
- Spent at least 7 hours making a new livejournal
- My sister had her friends over-had to avoid them
- Wrote a lot in my “diary”

- Watched far too much TV
- Tried making plans
- Talked online with Holly a lot
- Picked up the phone and listened to the dial tone for awhile
- Always having minifights with my dad

It's kind of hard to do this, only because I hardly ever do anything worth remembering. The most recent events seemed to pop into my head at first, like the ones that happened yesterday. Then by the end I thought about little things that have happened. One of the things that seemed like nothing (picking up the phone) was actually more significant than anything else.

Serena was increasingly intrigued by these Daily Log entries that served to “collect the mundane.” She admitted that she had “dismissed” them at first, only to find, when I asked her to look back over what she had written and write about the process, that there were often “valuable little things on the list, usually the littler the better” she was “drawn to use as feedback or a trigger” for her writing. Later, she used Daily Log entries to “jumpstart” her writing process when she “felt a block coming on.” I shared with her that one of my advisors, a poet named Steven Cramer, often “tricked himself” into writing by collecting quotes, words and phrases he had read or thought of that he could use to start the process; anything to soften the confrontation with the blank page. While her goal as a participant was “clearly of a personal nature,” Serena seemed to benefit from her increasing realization that other writers struggled, just as she did, with personal and creative “gremlins” and that the “intersection between the two” might be fruitful in ways she had not envisioned.

Serena wrote an entry about the Present Moment in her Period Log, a “diary/story” in order to “find out more about herself.” This objective was clearly at

work in this moment. She also underscored the significance of an audience, both personally and for her writing. For Serena, the writing process was never compartmentalized. The personal was ‘always there, no matter what I’m working on.’

This period in my life is mainly about finding myself. It actually started last Friday, when I started writing my diary/novel. I’m writing it so that I can figure out what is going on in my head. I don’t want to just keep everything bottled up inside, I want to get it down on paper and put it out there instead of just dwelling on every thought that comes across my mind. I want to be able to figure out what I’m feeling and why I’m feeling it, and to try to make myself better for it. It’s mainly just for me, but I let other people read it too, because part of me wants to know what they think and wants advice from them. I’m basically just trying to figure out who I am and what is going on in my life right now.

Before she read her entry aloud, I asked her to write about the process.

This was easy to come up with because I know exactly where I am in my life now. Despite not understanding a lot in my life, I at least know where I am. Lately I have gotten used to picking apart my own brain and figuring out where I am is a part of that.

Serena explained the difference between “not understanding” but “knowing where she was.” She said that she “knew what she had to do” but was not quite sure how she was going to do it or what she might “discover” about herself. Given that she had demonstrated some facility with and affinity for the creative process, I suggested that she “sit with” this present moment in her life and allow images from the moment to emerge. Images need not be “pictures”; they might be sensory responses or bodily sensations like itching, or come to her in the form of objects as metaphoric representations of the significance of this moment. She was entranced; the possibility of a “direct connection”

between experience and image was “powerful.” Her list was brief; she would return to it many times in the coming months.

- Tears
- Wilted roses
- Smell of paper
- Scars
- Arms around me
- Morning sunlight
- Pacing the floor with an upset stomach
- ink

I mentioned the possibility of “opening up and extending” one of the items on the list in writing that day. She demurred, saying that she “liked them the way they are” would rather “leave them alone and go back to them” later. In adherence to my objective of honoring the vagaries of the individual process and its boundaries and the fluid nature of the creative process as well, I did not force the issue.

Now that she was oriented in the Present Moment of her life, we could progress with the technique of *time stretching*. As I described the process of identifying and working with “Steppingstones” in her life, I paraphrased Progoff’s explanation, one of the only times in the process I “followed a script” of sorts. The first time Serena worked with the Steppingstones, I suggested she start with “the basic facts” of her life drawn from vital statistics, memories and/or the images that emerged from them. The Steppingstones were meant to be recognized as significant points of movement along the road of life. They might be “turning points,” events, persons or periods of time that “made a difference in the way your life has gone.” The first step in this practice was to list eight to ten Steppingstones, using a process of “spontaneous selectivity,” paying little if any attention to chronological sequence; items on the list could be renumbered later, if

she chose. The one specific guideline was the number of items on the list. As with previous *Intensive Journal* exercises, the limitation served to focus attention and prevent over-absorption in the events and emotions of the time. She would read the list aloud in order to “feed back” into herself the experience of her own existence. If she wanted to briefly elaborate several of the items on the list, she could also do that. However, she would only read the words or phrases aloud.

Before she read her list aloud, I had her write about the process and read this “process piece” aloud *before* I heard the Steppingstones list.

It was actually kind of hard to come up with things. At first I thought of the obvious ones, but then it was hard to come up with other things. It seems like there have been events in my life that have been significant, but I haven't really realized that they are. It's like there are a few events that just stand out so much that I completely forget about the other ones.

I had deliberately refrained from asking direct biographical questions in order to more fully explore what this writing process might reveal. I was immediately struck by what her commentary had in common with many others who had been overwhelmed by life event at a young age: she had devoted so much time to “moving on” and “coping” that she minimized the impact of some of the events. Others cast such a long shadow that she “forgot” them.

- Having my first relationship
- Watching my parents go through their divorce
- Having my first crush that lasted years
- Becoming obsessed with music
- Finishing my first novel-and rewriting it 2 more times
- Having to live alone with my dad
- Realizing in 1st grade that I wanted to be a writer

As I had with Bree, I suggested that Serena try an “extension exercise” in which she would write a “verb statement” for each item on the list. This activity seemed to make it possible to “zero in on the essence of an event,” all the while “feeding back” its significance to the writer.

As had happened when Bree read her list aloud, Serena was visibly moved by the sound of her own voice reading these statements aloud. Throughout our work together, she would not be “as affected by” the oral reading of any other writings she generated. She said it was as if she was “writing poetry and putting these things in their places all at once.” She said she felt a “sympathy” for herself that she had not experienced before, because “so much had happened.”

I found my calling.

I opened my heart.

I got lost.

I waited.

I obsessed.

I succeeded.

I coped.

Before Serena left, she said that she would email me about a time to meet in the next week or two. It might be possible for us to work together at her house because her dad worked during the days most weeks. I knew there was much more to learn about this “hopeless romantic” who had chosen to live alone with her father even though her mother and brother lived “nearby.”

It was at this point in my work with both of them that the process diverged, and I began to make methodological decisions more tailored to their individual needs as I was coming to understand them. Their writing and reflecting styles were different and the pace at which they worked varied considerably. We had taken the joint process as far as

it would support disclosure to this point; perhaps they would work together later, but I was not anticipating that occasion in my planning.

Holly

I asked Holly to write a brief entry in her Daily Log “in the quiet” which, as usual, she would not read aloud, and I would not read or ask for commentary about. After she finished that writing, I suggested she move on to the Present Moment and compose a time-limited list of words and phrases that “marked off” this moment in time for her. This time I asked her to write about her process when she was done with the list and read aloud this “process write” *before* she read her list to me.

I’ve written about most of these things in poems or essays before, which doesn’t make them go away, but it helps relieve some feelings. Writing about these things helped to break down mental blocks; if I can’t concentrate on homework or something because something is bothering me, writing about it helps to get it out into something permanent, even if it only helps temporarily.

- Jealousy
- Relationships with friends-people I like but don’t like (a list of first names)
- Procrastination
- Fears about the future (college)
- Relationships with parents, maybe?

I noted the tentative “maybe” and the question mark next to the last item on her list. She “felt almost an obligation to add them to the list” but wasn’t sure she wanted to “spend the summer dwelling endlessly on all that.” I suggested that she use these lists as “records” of what occurred to her at the time she composed them, for later reference perhaps, but she would not be “obligated” to write about everything on these lists. However, she and I also needed to “have our antenna up” for what she “might be

avoiding” that could be worth exploring, even if it were challenging. I noticed but did not acknowledge a decided change in her affect during this discussion; the cheerful façade was replaced with a sober watchfulness for the first time. Something about this process had taken her deeper than she had been before. It had become clear that she tried hard not to have that happen. Perhaps she was letting her guard down because we were alone.

Trusting that our rapport was established by now, I mentioned that I had taken both girls up on their invitation to visit the livejournal website and read what they were writing. The previous night I had read what she had written about her mother (a brief reference to her illness and that it was “getting worse”). As she was wont to do when the conversation approached guarded territory, she got very quiet. She told me that while it was comforting to know that “someone was out there reading her pieces and keeping her company,” it was not always helpful because “they may not have been in my shoes so it doesn’t feel authentic.” I told her that I thought she and I shared this tendency to talk and write *around* personal issues without “deciding” them in our writing. She commented that the word “deciding” made her think about “what it takes to get clear.” She also agreed that it was ultimately more dangerous to keep uncomfortable things bottled up than deal with the discomfort of writing about them to begin with. She “tended to write things for livejournal to “put them out there,” never really expecting help. Privately, I wondered when she had stopped expecting to be helped. *That* would be a Steppingstone worth writing about.

Reflexivity Journal

I certainly can identify with what I sense is Holly's rather extraordinary effort to keep her feelings under control. I was quite surprised to read about her mother in her livejournal entry last night; sounds like she has cancer and yet there is intense anger directed at her. Holly chose NOT to read aloud again today; it will take her awhile to open up. And cost her a lot; but that cost is weighed against the cost of keeping it inside.

I gave her the directions for writing “verb statements” about the items on her list and had her read those aloud to me when she was finished. I vividly remember the first time she read one of these lists aloud. As was the experience of the other girls, she was taken aback at the sound of her own voice “reciting her life back” to her. This list “said more, said it all and it sounded like a poem.”

I was born.
 I had a blanket.
 I walked.
 I wrote.
 I visited; I missed.
 I played.
 I loved.
 I cried.
 I grew.
 I interrogated.
 I changed.
 I got annoyed.
 I lived.
 I studied.
 I cried again.
 I stressed.
 I traveled.
 I didn't want to come back.
 I learned.
 I watched.
 I listened.
 I envied.
 I decided.
 I thought.
 I hoped.
 I grew.

Holly would go on to write a number of these verb statement lists outside of our session time. She even modified the process: she took items from a Steppingstone list she had composed at home and wrote verb statements for *each item* on the list. She wrote about this process months later.

I liked doing these because they made me think differently about my life; they made life seem simpler in a time when it was confusing. The fact that I had to choose a particular word forced me to condense it. I knew what it was about. The trick was to come up with just the right word. It wasn't always easy.

Holly was reluctant to read aloud. However, she read the verb statements aloud without hesitation. After much discussion, she and I concluded that there was an element of “distance” in the “summary” form of them that made them “feel safe” to her. This “wading in” to her experiences could also be understood as an attempt to “enter into a relationship” with aspects of experiences that still had much to tell her about herself. Just as her postings on the livejournal website were about “getting feedback” and “having company,” perhaps it was time to work with a strategy that would enable this same “dialogue” with persons or events that might “speak back” to her.

As I did with the Steppingstone exercise (and later in the same way with Serena), I paraphrased Progoff's explanation of the practice and the benefits as he observed them. I appreciated his emphasis on the power of feedback and intuitive guidance and his acknowledgement of “inner and outer” lives as a natural, albeit potentially “tricky” part of the way human beings functioned in the world. The dialogue work was part of the larger process of establishing an inner relationship with all the significant areas of her life, an outer dialogue that was also an inner dialogue within her life. The dialogue

would be written as a script, composed in a form close to actual speech in order to allow the writer to “bypass” her tendency to analyze what was being said. I suggested she consider individuals who had an important influence in her life as she experienced it “from an interior point of view.”

The writing process began with her writing a brief statement describing the whole of the relationship: she should describe the relationship where it was now, even if the person were no longer in her life. When she had completed this introductory description, she should read this piece to herself, not aloud. This re-reading was not meant to be interpretive; she should not make changes or edits but let the original stand. If she felt the need to make changes, she should add them to the original. This “context” piece was considered an essential part of the preparation for the dialogue exercise. It would enable her to make whatever adjustments she found necessary within herself. It would be important for her to observe and perhaps note her own emotional responses to the process and record them as objectively as she could; these emotions were an important part of the process of “loosening the soil” of her inner life. The goal was to reach a level that she had not reached before, to get beyond “outer masks.”

I have found that teenagers appreciate metaphoric references to “depth” and “going deeper,” etc. They spend an inordinate amount of time exploring “what lies beneath” as Serena put it, as well as “the relationship between an inner and outer life,” convinced that “there is something down there” that they do not always understand, a “place” they would like to know more about.

After some time working with her list, Holly announced that she had identified a person with who she would like to dialogue.

Jocelyn is my equal, technically. But sometimes she seems superior, better than me. I've known her since I was 3, but we weren't friends. Our moms worked together. I remember sitting in a booth, coloring next to a little blonde girl. I remember not liking her. Well, I figured out later that that was Jocelyn.

For the past year, I've felt a competition, unspoken, between the 2 of us. She's better at math; I'm better at chem.. She's more social & outgoing; but I have my life planned out. But if we compete, she always wins. I find myself jealous of her; sometimes I hate her. Yet she's my friend.

I think it's because we're so similar. We're both only children; driven, independent overachievers who feel the need to do better than other people. I know she has a problem being happy for her close friends who succeed; so do I. And we both need to be the best. We both need to see others fall in order to feel better. Bad habits that we have in common. She gets everything she wants, & things that others want, too.

For once, I'd like to see her fall flat on her face. And I bet she'd say the same about me.

In the next step of the process she would place herself "inside" the life of that person and list that person's Steppingstones, writing them in the first person, as many of them as she might know. She should let the list form itself, noting as many things as suggested themselves to her. Holly thought this phase of the process was "weird"; she had never put herself "inside a person's life like this."

Jocelyn's Stepping Stones

Her boyfriend
 Friendship with me
 Moving
 Cheerleading and dance
 Marketing class
 Good grades
 Other boys
 Siblings being born
 Getting a car
 Middle school-friends, parties, etc
 Drama-plays
 Getting a job

Friendship with Amanda

Given that I had read her description and knew she was writing about a relationship that was characterized by unresolved conflict, and in the spirit of monitoring her affective response to the process along the way, I ventured a comment that she looked uncomfortable. She was surprised at how annoyed she felt, “impatient about having to take the time to get inside her life like this.” I reminded her of how much there is to learn about ourselves from our interactions with others but that we don’t often take the time to reflect on them or view ourselves from their perspective. There could be feedback and learning there, too. Now, “in the silence,” I suggested that she might like to close her eyes briefly, although that was optional. I knew she was familiar with guided meditation from her gym class when they did yoga. I told her that what I would say to explain this part of the process might sound like that and that I hoped the familiar association would make her feel more at ease. She closed her eyes while I read the guiding script.

After she began writing, Holly wrote steadily without stopping.

H: I don't hate you.

J: Well, it seems like it.

H: No, I don't hate you. I just hate some of the things you do.

J: Like what?

H: You've changed, Jocelyn.

J: What are you talking about?

H: You're different than you used to be.

J: How am I different?

H: I dunno, your attitude towards certain things and your morals.

J: My morals? What do you mean, my morals?

H: Like how you said you would never drink and all of a sudden you're into partying and
whatever.

J: So? That doesn't mean I've changed.

H: Yes, it does! Suddenly it's like you're too cool for some of us.

J: What the hell are you talking about?

H: It's like you're always trying to impress someone, like you're trying to prove that

you're better than people.

J: Are you calling me a snob?

H: Not exactly, but all of a sudden you and Amanda are hanging around with all these

“cool” kids and whatever.

J: What does Amanda have to do with anything?

H: I hate the way you two act together.

J: What? Why?

H: Because you both get really annoying.

J: Oh, so now I'm annoying?

H: To tell you the truth, yea, you can get really annoying.

J: Well, know what Holly? If you don't like it, then don't talk to me anymore.

H: I'm not done.

J: I don't care. I don't want to hear anything else.

H: Fine then. Go hang out with all these “friends” of yours. Get drunk, do what you want. But see who's going to be there for you in the end. It won't be them.

I suggested she write about what this process was like for her while it was still fresh in her mind and before we talked about it.

I got a little angry after I wrote this. But I don't feel like I got everything she would have said. I think that if this had actually been spoken, it would have been much longer. I felt like I was doing it wrong, like I was just trying to come up with something so I could get it down and then say what I wanted to say to her. I realized I don't have much to say to her these days, that she just annoys me sometimes. And now my head hurts; I avoid confrontation, so conflicts like this would never happen.

I advised her that the dialogues usually tended to be “shorter and more focused” than “ordinary conversation” which was actually one of the benefits of the process. In this way, the issues tended to come to the surface. It was important to attend to her bodily reactions as well; I reinforced the merit of noting her headache and the connection she drew between that somatic reaction and her avoidance of conflict. I reminded her that writers often experienced additional benefits from this dialogue work “gradually, over time” as well because it took time to “integrate” or “own” the significance of all the

“bits and pieces” of what had emerged and been uncovered. As it turned out, this would be the only dialogue Holly would attempt. Unbeknownst to us, the events of the coming weeks would prevent us from meeting again until late summer. By that time, she was “in no mood to talk like that.”

Subject Journal-Holly

I think Holly and I really made some progress today; we got to deeper ground. We certainly talked about avoidance and resistance; there are tons of ways we try to get out of facing things. I remember my own skepticism about the dialogue process; it seemed “fake” and almost “surreal,” the word I used to myself at the time. Until I experienced the process for the first time. I will never forget waking up that next morning at the workshop to find that my strep throat was completely gone. I could see her look more revealed, not as “perky,” more raw and bare. It showed in her face.

I know that I have gotten Holly to think about clarity, about the significance of saying what it is she really thinks and feels. How hard it is to do that when you have been pretending all your life. She asked me what to do if you get really angry in the dialogue exercise (a good sign that she is able to envision the process working). We talked about emotions then, that they are not always “out of control” and that I would “keep her company” as she learned what she needed to do with her anger. The opportunity to say things to someone that she hadn’t been able to talk to seemed to move her. I told her I might have seen her face without its mask, just briefly. She said she could feel it lifting.

Serena

Just as she had said she would, Serena emailed me with times and dates in the following week that would be convenient for her to meet with me. On the appointed day, which dawned clear and refreshingly cool, I drove to her house. This would be a lovely setting for our work, peaceful and serene. Instead of the sounds of school we had birds chirping in the trees and the breeze ruffling the leaves. However, our idyll was short-lived; her father drove in the yard. Serena’s affect changed noticeably. Here was another girl living with her father; unlike Bree, who seemed to come and go as she pleased with asking his permission, Serena and her father had a different relationship. He

seemed genuinely pleased to meet me, and I was gratified that she had obviously told him a bit about her work with me. He appreciated this opportunity for her to “work on things in her writing” and told me he would be glad to speak with me further if the need arose.

It was clear that his presence would inhibit our work. There was a lovely little park just up the road. I had chairs in my Jeep; how about if we tried to find a place to continue working outdoors? With bag chairs in hand, we headed up a wooded path. Almost immediately we found a little clearing with sun filtering through the trees.

Serena had done a Steppingstones list of “decisions and choices” she could recall in her life. She did the list in one sitting, trying to “write what came to me in any order.” She called it “Intersections” because I had used this word as part of the explanation of the *Intensive Journal* process.

- I chose to start writing
- I chose to live with my dad
- I chose to think things over too much
- I chose to bottle up my emotions
- I chose to be lazy
- I chose my friends
- I chose not to call my ex-boyfriend although I want to talk to him
- I chose to wait for emotions to figure themselves out without even trying

I was immediately struck by the fact that she was taking responsibility for a number of behaviors most teenagers would not acknowledge or would attribute to others. In order to afford her an opportunity to entertain another perspective, I suggested she choose one item on the list and consider how her life might have been different if she had made a different choice.

If I had chosen not to bottle up my emotions, a lot of things might have been different. I wouldn't be so shy; I wouldn't be depressed all the time. My boyfriend and I would still be together. I've never been an open person, and if I had been, maybe people would understand me more. Maybe they would take me seriously. Maybe I wouldn't feel like everyone always walks all over me. Maybe I'd be a lot happier.

It was important that she was aware that she had choices because that awareness would make it possible for her to learn to make different choices. Our emotions could give us valuable feedback about how we were responding to situations. However, if difficult things had happened and we felt "appropriately" uncomfortable, we still might "dislike the discomfort" and rather than "staying with it" in order to know more about what we were feeling, we might *choose* to try to make the discomfort go away. We also learned from those around us. Her father "always kept himself wrapped up"; she never knew what he was thinking. "We certainly don't talk about feelings in our house; we eat on TV trays in the living room so that the TV does the talking for us." He "never" asked her about her day or her friends.

I hoped she would find this next phase of the work helpful in shedding some light on additional strategies she might use to engage people and experiences or emotions in order to elicit additional feedback. I gave Serena the same lengthy explanation of the dialogue process I had given Holly. She composed her list of potential persons and identified someone with whom she would like to have a dialogue. "It was easy; he came right to me because of what you said about following the energy, what is drawing me." She balked, however, at composing a list of "his" Steppingstones. She hadn't known him that long; she didn't know that much about his life. This was a noteworthy development, one I had not observed in this process before. The process was already "feeding back" to

her, however. “I wonder what that’s about, that I’m in a relationship with someone I don’t know that well?”

We were friends at first, really good friends. We were polar opposites, and yet we had a lot in common. Eventually it became more than friendship—we both had feelings for each other. So suddenly we were boyfriend and girlfriend, and things seemed perfect for awhile. To others we were the perfect couple. But underneath that exterior, we both just bottled up our emotions and never communicated, and it ended up destroying us. Now we don’t even talk, we’re just left in this moment of time with so much anger and pain and we don’t do anything about it.

The explanatory note she added about her “overall response” was brief and seemed to emphasize points she had already made.

It started out positive—we seemed to have a perfect relationship. But eventually, and without any warning, it all came crashing down.

Serena told me later she “never forgot” the first time I gave the introduction to the actual writing of the dialogue script. ‘I could see it all unfolding right in front of me; this made such perfect sense, to talk like this in writing. I never had any doubt I could do it, even with a memory or an image from something. I was psyched. I would be able to say things.’ She had chosen to work this first time with her ex-boyfriend because they had “just a ton of unfinished business and potential, no matter what happened, and I want to get through all that.”

S: Why, am I never good enough for anyone?

C: Why are you asking me this?

S: Because I obviously wasn’t good enough for you, so I just wanna know why no one can ever accept me.

C: I never said you weren’t good enough for me.

S: Well what exactly am I supposed to think? You keep saying how you thought you had to fix me. Do you have any idea what that feels like to hear you say that?

C: I'm not the only one who's said that.

S: Well, whenever anybody else did, they were just joking. You were serious. It's like I had to be perfect or you wouldn't be able to accept me. I am a human being, you know. I have feelings. And I'm not broken, so you can't try to fix me.

C: I just wanted to make things better.

S: It's not like you ever really tried.

C: You didn't either.

S: Because I didn't know I had to! I thought things were fine. I don't think you realize that for me, this came out of nowhere. It was like you just got sick of me and decided to throw me away.

C: It wasn't like that at all. Things weren't all right for a long time.

S: Well how was I supposed to know if you never told me? You always seemed happy; I never had any idea of how you really felt. And it's like you just gave up. I can't believe how easily you gave up on us. It isn't fair, not to me or to you.

She added a brief note about the process of writing this dialogue.

It felt frustrating to have to imagine talking to him, because there is still so much that is unresolved. But it also felt good to be able to say things I want to say and get them out.

Serena would struggle with the ambiguity of this “unresolved” relationship for weeks to come. She found herself “choosing to cling to it” as her only “lifeline” to the “good feelings this relationship gave me that I never had before.” Her reluctance to “move on” gave her a new opportunity to learn about herself. In time she saw that she had invested him with “all the power to control what she felt, even about herself” and this realization was “the beginning of letting go.”

Driving home today from my time with Serena, I felt the familiar blessing of this work I have done with teenagers most of my life. I have missed it in the years since I left the high school. Their trust and their courage in the face of the turmoil of adolescence never ceased to amaze me and are qualities I will always treasure and continue to learn from. There are so many ways our voices are not heard, so many ways we try to speak and no one hears. Working with her, I realize even more that “things are not what they appear to be.” She seemed so guarded, almost bored in the beginning, and I realize now that the truth was far from that; she is with me for the long haul, fiercely determined to learn about herself through her writing. She is much more able to write in an authentic voice than the others, not as distanced. One more thing to think about.

Near the end of the summer, I received startling news in an email message from Serena. Holly’s mother had passed away that morning. She knew Holly’s mother had been sick but had no idea that her illness was potentially fatal. There was always more to learn about her, as she kept her life so tightly wrapped. Needless to say, I told Serena I was available to meet. I also left Holly a brief message on her answering machine and sent her an email message expressing my sadness at hearing the news of the loss of her mother and letting her know that we could meet when she was ready.

Serena had been thinking “as usual.” Holly’s situation was another example of the silence she struggled with in herself. When I was doing the preliminary research for this study, I had come across a quote by a writer named Gaston Bachelard that addressed this point. “Our first suffering lies in the moment we begin the accumulation of silence.” She and I had been talking about choices last time. Surely this was part of what Bachelard meant, as if there were something purposeful in the word “accumulation.” After awhile, silence became a habit. Now, Serena saw herself “on the receiving end” of her own silence and unwillingness to let her friends “in.” “I probably would have done what Holly did, just kept all this to myself.” It was like “holding a mirror up to myself.” We would do this with images: use them as mirrors to reflect back to us those aspects of

relationships and events and the passage of time itself that might help us “see and hear” more of ourselves than we knew before.

Serena was “in the process” of working on a poem that was “depressing but necessary.” She would have finished it by the next time we met and thought I would be interested in the process she was using, something she had never done before in working on a poem. However, she didn’t want to talk “too much” about it right then because talking “might contaminate the idea.” She chose to “free write” for a period of time because she wanted to do “more explaining of myself.”

I’m a nutcase. I really am. Maybe it’s just part of being a girl. Or maybe it’s that so many things drive me crazy—family, school, love. All of it. Even writing, which at times can be my one peaceful escape, makes me crazy. I come up with the strangest ideas of what to write. And I love it. If I didn’t get that craziness onto paper then it might stay in my head and I could end up in a strait jacket. I’m obsessive beyond all reason. I love writing and music. I couldn’t live without them. So many times they have been what gets me through a day. I can trust them to be there for me. I let things get to me too easily sometimes. I let depression take over too much, and it keeps me from getting things done. Because it’s so much easier to lie on the couch and watch CSI repeats than to write a two-page English paper. When I’m depressed, I just don’t care. I’m really a hopeless romantic, although no one would really know it. I hide it, too much sometimes. It comes out when I’m alone. I listen to sappy love songs and jump on the couch. I go absolutely nuts on weekends because I miss my friends (and I used to miss my boyfriend). But nobody knows it. Nobody knows a lot of things about me, what goes on inside my head. I zone out constantly. I love to do it in school. I completely leave the world behind and go into my own. I think about my stories, picturing scenes from them. Sometimes a scene will plague me for an entire week until I actually write it. But sometimes it takes so long for those pictures to turn into words. I don’t think what I write will ever measure up to what I saw, and no one else will ever be able to see those images.

The writer, it seemed, had a particular burden with her keen awareness of these limitations as well as how words could be misunderstood. I told her I was concerned about the emerging themes of depression and silence, never the healthy combination. She brought me back to the word “trust” she had used in this piece. Her experience with writing, even when she used it to “deal with” personal challenges, had taught her that, “as bad as it got or felt, it would hold whatever I put in it. Not only that but then all that stuff is on the page, not inside me.” This was what she found so “cool” about reading her writing aloud. Even though she knew she had a choice about whether to read aloud, it was as if she had “this one chance to say this stuff out loud and I won’t blow it. Right now it’s the only chance I get and maybe it will become a habit, just like the damned silence.” Thinking back to this “depressed poem,” I certainly understood about the way writing could “contain” emotion; however, I also had experienced its power to “plunge to the depths and carry the writer along with a will of its own.” I would feel better if she stayed in close touch with me while she was working on this poem, all part of “keeping each other company.”

Serena wanted to try another Steppingstones exercise with “those verb sentences.” In her on-going effort to “get through to the other side” of her feelings for her “ex-boyfriend,” she wanted to make “the relationship” the topic of this exercise so that she could “see the time of it.”

- Valentines’ Day
- Me being overwhelmingly insecure
- Getting used to the idea of being with someone
- Hugs
- Stupid friends
- Prom
- Missing

- Being neglected
- The phone call
- Letters
- Not being able to get over it

She was again visibly moved when she read the verb statements aloud.

I was happily terrified

I dwelled

I got what I always wanted

I breathed

I was annoyed

I felt safe

I whined

I suspected

I cried

I tried

I loved

She added a written comment about her process after she finished reading the list aloud.

Making the first list was pretty easy. It's painful to dig for those memories, both the good and the bad, but they came to my mind very easily. I like writing the verb sentences, not only because it lets my creative side come out, but it lets me look at the situations and think about them but not very specific. And it helps to narrow down the situation to one inner emotion that I felt at the time and that represents it.

Serena did not have to include or be distracted by numerous (painful) details.

Instead she could address her subjective response to this on-going situation in general yet "narrow" terms, letting the choice of the verbs do the work of speaking her feelings aloud. I emphasized the fact of yet another choice process at work here. It occurred to her that she had "more choices than I thought; I am not as trapped as I was in my own mind."

To conclude our work of this day and in anticipation of the imaginal task that we would work with shortly, I suggested that she reflect on what she had written and see if a particular image or metaphor emerged.

I see a waiting room, like a doctor's office. It's weird because it's full of cigarette smoke and I can't breathe; I hate that smell. The air is so smoky I can't see either. Everything smells horrible and I want to get out of there but I can't see the door through the smoke.

She was excited. "I just love metaphors; they always come to me when I'm writing my stories and sometimes I just sit back and let them tell me what I was going to say." This image of the waiting room, in which she was sitting alone, was intriguing to her. "I wonder where the smoke is coming from? It has to be coming from someone else or some thing else; I would never smoke. But I know it may not be real. That's just what this situation feels like right now; I hate it but I can't seem to get out."

Holly

Holly replied to my email that night. She was "fine" (of course! I thought to myself) but "tired" and would not be able to see me until all of the family left. I was concerned that the perky façade had dropped back in place, all the while acknowledging the necessity of its protection at that time.

Serena

Serena and I met again at the end of the summer vacation. She was tired of "obsessing" over her ex-boyfriend and had "mixed feelings" about coming back to school because she would "have to face all that again." She had just turned eighteen and hoped that "being an adult would change things."

In response to the interview questions, I asked her to write her answers first before reading them aloud. The format of her answers was not important; she should go

with whatever emerged from the content of her answers. I told her that I was curious about whether writing the answers first might enable her to experience the “meditative/contemplative” aspect of the writing process more fully. It might also help her “solidify” the conceptions as they came. As I observed her process, it appeared that Serena was certainly generating more in her answers than she might have if I were just talking with her. I sensed that there was more internal exploration going on than if I had just asked her the questions in a conventional interview format. When she finished writing her response to the first question, she commented that she had written more than she thought she would. (See Appendix D).

At this point in the process, I remembered the image of the waiting room that had come to her before. I suggested she “wait with” each of the words on her list in order to see whether an image or a metaphor might emerge that would “speak to her” and to me about this time of her life.

“Stuck”-being in a glass case while everyone and everything in my life just walks by

“tired”-wanting to be in a coffin-not dead, just asleep, confined to that small space where nothing can get to me.

Both of these images were arresting and noteworthy; the second one, in addition to a number of other “depressed” references in her previous writing added up to the need to speak further with her father and counselor about arranging additional therapeutic support for Serena. I shared my concerns with her, and she reiterated her previous disclaimer, that there was “nothing suicidal about this image, more that it was just small and dark and sheltered.” To her the glass case was “the reverse of being on the outside looking in, not the kid looking in the window at what he can’t have but being the thing in

the window that everyone looks at.” She thought for a minute: “that might also mean that people might want what they see in me, and I don’t know it.” Nevertheless, she agreed to have me speak with her father and explore therapeutic contacts with the school psychologist. If she were “sitting here writing” about her “need to talk more,” then it was time to “face the music.” She was “amazed” at how easily these images came to her and how much they could “teach” her if she “just stayed with them.”

We returned to the interview questions. Even though she didn’t characterize her writing as a method of coping with challenging personal experiences at the time, Serena came to see that “escaping to and from” was her primary choice of coping method, whether it be into the fantasy world of her writing or her self-imposed silence.

Holly

Holly and I were communicating via email. She wrote me a brief message every day; she was maintaining contact. Her notes usually started or ended with a written “haha,” a transcription of that nervous edgy laugh she used to mask her feelings when she talked during our sessions. I hoped the “writing muses were keeping company with her” until she was ready to join them again.

When I saw her again, I suggested that we work very slowly in the coming days in order to give her time to absorb this loss, much as it might be tempting to rush back to “things as normal.” She said she wanted to get back to work with her writing “soon” because the longer she put it off the “chunkier” it would get. Could the writing process make it possible for her to “stay in there” longer than she might like in order to open up some of the painful things that had happened?

For this day, she wanted to “just write, ramble and let the words come to me.”

She never did read this piece aloud, the longest piece she ever produced, although she made sure I had a copy to read “by myself” and “for the other girls.” It would be the closest she would come to addressing difficult thoughts and feelings, albeit indirectly.

I have been told to write. My English teacher told me to “keep writing.” But I haven’t been able to. And pretty much still can’t. But I’m going to try to. No fancy words, no inspiring prose, no poetry or dramatization. I’m just going to write.

I think the death of my mother came as a shock to me only because I was the one that found her. I knew she was dead right away because her face was blue. But I checked anyway. At the viewing the next day she looked like she was sleeping. The makeup people had done a good job. But there was still a thin blue line where her lips met, which proved to me that she was really dead. I think the blue is what scares me the most; I can imagine her lying in her bed. I can see her arm and shirt and stomach, but all I can see in place of her head, is blue.

I cried, of course. I cried then because it was a shock. But I [here she crossed out “think”] was crying for reasons that escape most people. I wasn’t crying because I would miss my mom. My mom, the one who would take me out for ice cream or stayed with me when I was scared or didn’t feel well, had been gone for a while. Her soul and liveliness had been leaking out since freshman year, since she started becoming sick. I cried because the death was a statement saying I would never have the chance to have a mom again. The woman who was lying in her bed was merely a half-filled shell of the person she used to be. My dad doesn’t seem to understand this or why I haven’t had a nervous breakdown. It’s because I’ve seen my mother deteriorate in front of my eyes. I was around more than he was, during vacations and half days and such. And I saw her fading. We fought constantly; so she did and my dad. I think that’s why he is so upset; I think he feels guilty about things he said. Things he can’t take back. He gets mad at me because I don’t want to talk about her, but my best memories are of when I was younger. The last three years contain more anger, pain, and annoyance than they do love and joy. This whole experience would have been harder had she not been sick; if it had been very sudden. But if she hadn’t been sick, it would not have happened. And I knew it was coming the weekend before it happened. I was home. I was in the house the whole time, except to go to work. It was like the calm before the storm, because we didn’t fight. She didn’t yell at me about anything; it was like she knew she was going to go. And I’m glad she left

when she did, because it was an escape from the pain. And I'm glad we weren't fighting. I feel no guilt now. Well, I feel a little guilty but not much. I'm not extremely sorry for our fights or things I said. I'm not going to take back everything just because she's gone. And I'm not going to lie and say we got along, because we didn't. I hated her most of the time. And I hated how she wasn't the mother I remembered or wanted. There's no point in me trying to pretend like we were best friends, because it's just a lie. I can't say I wish this didn't happen. It's a relief. Now I don't have to worry about her, or yell at her to eat or go to the doctor. I can leave the house and not feel guilty about leaving. I know I can care for myself; as she got worse, I became more independent. I'm glad there will be no more fights or getting ice or guilt trips. But sometimes I wish there was someone here in the morning with me so I wasn't alone. I hate going into her room because I'm afraid I'll go in there and see her corpse again, even though I know that's not possible. I'm trying to get over everything and move on, but everyone else keeps pulling me back.

They say every cloud has a silver lining. The silver lining in this case is delivering a woman from pain and suffering and relieving her daughter and husband of guilt and worry and servitude. It showed how many people care about me and opened up ways for conversation between me and two friends I thought I'd lost. It got me my Aladdin tape back and re-established family bonds. But most of all it put something that's been happening for awhile to an end. It ended a period of my life filled with sorrow and annoyance. I don't have to fight with her anymore. I can look at pictures and think of her without feeling hatred. It sucks having her gone, but I'd rather have this than the way things were a few months ago.

That's all I have to say about it. There are things that happen in life that no one can understand, but this isn't one of them. Everything happens for a reason. Everything.

Subject Journal-Holly

I have just finished reading the long piece she wrote today in the office at school. There are still so many defenses armed and at the ready. She will need that protection for a while, she will cling to that anger as "the story" of that time with her mother. I see so many examples of the limitations of writing here. With every supposed affirmation of her own strength and willingness to move on and relief, there are dozens of sobs and longings that are being buried deeper and deeper. Holly writes more to shore up the defenses, to convince herself rather than to understand or confront. The relief she feels is genuine and appropriate, and it's healthy to be able to express that. But I know her well enough by now. That concluding sentence: "That's all I have to say about it." As if she understands everything. Phew. I remember this role so well. I played it for years and years. There is such illusory comfort in that certitude. I can only share that experience

with her a bit at a time in the hopes that she will soften enough to let the ambiguity that is life in. And learn to keep it company.

The next time we met, I suggested that it might be helpful if she wrote down a brief list of “challenging circumstances” to use as a reference when she was considering her answers to the upcoming interview questions. As she might expect, a number of the questions had to do with her response to difficult situations, and I acknowledged the timing of this interview, so close to the loss she had experienced. I did not ask her to read this list aloud.

- *Relationship w/ mother over past 2 or so years*
- *Problems with friends (with mention of specific names)*
- *Knee injuries/running problems*
- *Fear of the future*

She had included a reference to her mother; in fact, as she put it, this list “covered the whole spectrum, a cross-section of what has happened to me.” She did read her answers aloud after she finished composing each one. Several were answered in list form, others in more expanded paragraphs. The first list was impressively comprehensive. Apparently the “cross-section list” helped her focus on specific behaviors. I was particularly interested in her choice to expand on certain items on the list. I thought I detected a pattern in her writing about difficult topics: she tended to use additional words as a “buttress” to convince herself and others that this trait was indeed at work; things were “under control.” (See Appendix C).

Reflexivity Journal

I am sharing much of my own background of pretending to be strong with Holly: when I was a teenager, not even my best friend knew what I was dealing with. I had no one to talk to about what was going on at home. I was clear about the sometimes beneficial use

of defenses; they keep us moving thru the day. However, they can become dangerous if we can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Like the show Mr. Rogers, which she used to watch. I have used this example before: how he clearly differentiated between the "world of make believe" and reality so that kids would be more likely to tell the difference (as opposed to Sesame Street where no such clearly drawn line existed). She needs a safe place to be herself, to tell and speak the "truth" sometimes, whatever that is for her.

By the second week of September, the school year was underway, and summer vacation was a memory. The girls were already tired and "stressed" by the demands of homework, activities and the "drama" of their senior year. I would see Holly and Serena on the same day but not together.

Serena

The first time I met with Serena that fall, she told me it was time to "take a few risks, live outside the box." She was glad to be back in school because she had been "bored stiff" all summer, but she was also dreading seeing her ex-boyfriend every day. No, she had not "moved on" but was "moving toward acceptance" of their parting. Over the summer she had written one poem "in particular" she wanted to share with me because she thought I would be interested in the writing process she used. She had anticipated my question about the process.

I was inspired to write this poem after reading scattered poems because sometimes just reading poetry gets me in the poetic mood. The concept came to me because of what people say to me and also thinking about a dream I had had a few nights before. I was outside my English class with him for some reason and we were talking like everything was normal. When he went to leave I called after him, and suddenly the whole mood changed. He hugged me and I started crying. He told me that he wanted to be with me but just couldn't right now, so I had to keep holding on. And he half asked, half told me that sometimes I knew that I had to hold on, that there was a reason for it, and I kept saying "I know, I know."

People have said “you need to get over it” and I haven’t been able to because it’s been too hard. But then I thought I could get over “it” and not get over “him” because there’s a difference. I think the image of water and the stones came to me from all that talk about Steppingstones; I built on that in my own way.

The process she used to compose and revise this poem was new to her; it seemed to “evolve” from the poem itself. As a result of this experience, Serena began to discover how to “serve” the process.

I wrote most of this poem around 2 a.m. I got my creative process going by taping sheets of paper to the walls so it’d be like scribbling all over the walls without actually ruining them. I had actually worked on the poem for a few weeks, and had written a few stanzas but didn’t really know the exact direction it was going to go in. I didn’t want to force it. I wanted to just let random lines pop into my head when they wanted, because usually that is my best kind of writing. It started with this emotion I had had for awhile (but when I wrote this poem had more or less gotten rid of) so it was like putting myself back into my own shoes a few weeks or months back. And by the time I got into it (and this is usually the case with emotional poems) it wasn’t about the feelings, it was about actually just writing the poem itself.

Serena had read some poems aloud to herself in her room this summer when no one else was home, her own and others by poets she loved. She “loved to hear the sound of them in my voice.” Perhaps because of her increasing affinity for this part of the process, when she read aloud this day her voice was noticeably stronger and full of emotional affect. In her estimation her own poetry was “still too teenage,” but she was intrigued with the way fragments of thoughts and dreams and conversations were “weaving” into her work and the images were “full of meaning” for her.

*Loophole
that stepping stone seems so small*

so all I can do is stare at it
and I know
I should reach for it before I drown
before the rippling waters swallow me whole
but I'm torn
because the shore was safe
until it eroded into nothing
and I can't go back.
to love it to hurt
but not to love it to be alone
which is worse I can't decide
and there is hope in neither.
stuck
that's all I am
that's all I'll ever be
I don't know what I want,
whether to cling for dear life
I can't choose or try to move
my heart is stubborn
and has too much faith in my dreams
where I cry helplessly and he holds me,
tells me don't you dare let go
what I would give to know it was real
some higher power's sign
and not just a fantasy.
so I'm ripped in two
jagged edges that never seem to fit
if that's all I can do
then I'll meet myself half way
place one foot on that stone
and tell myself over and over
I love him, yes,
because cutting out my heart is not simple
I love him
but it doesn't hurt
it's buried deep inside
and I don't think about it.
keep telling myself that.
it's all I can do

and maybe I'll believe it.

Holly

The next time I met with Holly, she was back “in form,” dancing along from activity to class to track practice, with hardly a minute to breathe. It was a familiar routine, and she said it helped to keep things “organized.” She admitted, however, that she avoided having “too much time to think” these days. It was “quiet” at home with her dad; he had promised to think about getting her a kitten. They were “getting along really well”; they cooked dinner together sometimes and watched TV in the evenings. They were not just “two ships that bump in the night,” as Serena had described life with her father. I was working with three girls who all lived with their fathers. That subject was *another* study.

That morning the new vice-principal (her former writing teacher) came in to talk with me about Holly. When she arrived (early) to school every morning, Holly would already be there waiting in the English wing for her teachers. She was a highly regarded student, and the teachers welcomed her presence and often gave her “little tasks.” Her current English teacher recognized that school had become a sanctuary for her, as it was for many troubled students. However, “the cheerful act” was unnerving to them, and they felt it necessary to bring this information to her attention. The vice-principal had made an appointment for Holly with the school psychologist. I concurred; Holly would be “annoyed,” but it was important that she be given an opportunity to make contact with nurturing, well-trained adults in the school.

Following this discussion I was mindful of the book I was reading at the time, *Writing a Woman's Life* by Carolyn Heilbrun. We are all writing the stories of our lives;

where is the line between fiction and non-fiction? Holly was the mistress of artifice, and I recognized that act all too well. What kind of safety did she (did I) need to be able to let down the defenses? Later that morning, when Holly arrived, I asked her if she had spoken with the vice-principal. True to form, she was slightly irritated that the adults thought she needed “to talk to someone,” but I reminded her that she had said the same thing to me from time to time. She agreed to go. “Who knows? It might help.”

Holly told me she had been thinking about “the personal goals question” I had asked her in the interview because she felt that if she wrote them before “July 26”-the day her mother died”- they would be “different now.”

- Trying to appreciate my mother more
- Try to feel better about the past, I guess
- Get other girls to re-evaluate relationships
- Try to get past the mental block that has formed since she passed
- Let others know that writing is a cure & can help
- Remember (both myself & others) that no one is perfect.
- See how my stress levels have changed, and how I have changed

. My work with Holly compelled me to return to the significance of “triggers,” words or phrases or images that serve to “feed back” into the creative process. I wanted to understand more about how this illusory process worked; I imagined catching butterflies with a net, a delicate painstaking undertaking that yielded a fluttering treasure. Holly had been a dutiful, conscientious student throughout her childhood and adolescence and had learned how to give the teachers what they asked for. As happened with most academically talented goal-oriented students, she seemed to have lost touch with her own intrinsic motivation, her own love of learning. Instead she became externally motivated, as I had. She told me many times that she was “totally dependent now” on directions given from someone else. She had no idea what to do when she had “free” unstructured

time or an assignment that asked her to generate her own topic or “create something from scratch.” She rarely had the opportunity to follow her own process. I was determined to make that opportunity available to her.

Holly said that when she reviewed her list, she could “see a theme, like we do when we read a poem in English.” She and I were both ambivalent about our academic training. It was useful in situations that called for analysis, but it also inhibited the creative process. Here, she could see that a number of the items on the list had to do with “relationship.” Therefore, she thought she would like to write about her mother. I suggested that she think of her relationship with her mother as an on-going dialogue between them. I reminded her of the directive I had given her previously as a guide to structure her reflection about her mother.

However, when she addressed the blank page, she faltered. Now it felt like she was “moving away from that topic because it wasn’t going on anymore.” Was this because those memories and feelings have been worked through or buried? This was an important question; she reacted visibly. I suggested she try changing the topic to “my mother” and delete the word “relationship.” There was another instant visible physical reaction; obviously significant feedback from the change in wording, a trigger. She didn’t think she would be able to start.

I had started asking her *what feedback are you getting?* when she began to marshal the defenses. In the spirit of “taking good care of herself,” I suggested that we just sit together “in the silence” and see what she might be able to write. Although she was uncomfortable with the long silence at first, I didn’t waver. Once she began, Holly wrote thoughtfully and steadily. She declined to read the piece aloud when she was

finished writing, still protecting herself from the potential feedback of the sound of her own voice and the release painful feelings.

My mother was someone I loved when I was younger & hated as I got older. Her being sick caused her to be extremely hard to deal with, and in turn, our relationship fell to pieces. She was not someone I particularly respected or idolized, which makes me feel guilty. I appreciate what she did for me, I guess, but what she did dwindled after I started high school. I'm not the easiest person to deal with; neither was she. We were both extremely stubborn and strong-willed and I hated the fact she thought she knew everything, when I believed she was wrong and I was, in fact, the correct one in 99% of the situations.

I can't remember specific times or anger; all I remember is that she annoyed the hell out of me & I hated her for pretty much all my junior year. Her death was the end; after that, I felt no guilt towards her, nor anger, sorrow or anything. One burden had been lifted; there was one less thing to worry about. I feel no need to talk about her, to anyone because I feel like I had some twisted sort of closure and release. Sometimes I do think of her, but mainly I am thankful I don't have to deal with how she was—which, at the end of her life, was different than at the beginning of mine.

I noted the tone of detachment in her words, what I perceived as the displacement of her anger. She had to have been bitterly disappointed and angry about the hand that had been dealt their family; this became anger at her mother herself. She was also overwhelmed by the growing enormity of her mother's needs at a time when her own needs were becoming increasingly confusing. There was honesty in her writing, even as I still sensed the thread of denial woven through the piece. Could she sense the “distancing” (that might not occur if she were to write a poem, perhaps, about the subject)? This question seemed to reach her. Yes, she used poems “on purpose” when she wanted to write about feelings, but here “she was still explaining things.” People kept telling her she should “talk more about what had happened,” and she felt it necessary to “defend her position.”

How about if we approached the subject from the Steppingstones perspective, still in the context of relationship-as-dialogue? This time-limited writing would be a list, and I reminded her to “ignore the requirements of chronology” and note the items on the list as they came to her.

My Mother

- I was born prematurely. I was a mistake, mistake meaning my parents weren't supposed to have any kids.
- I grew up, an ambitious only child, raised mainly by my mom (dad worked), who taught me how to read & write. She worked when I was younger, but only until I was about 4. Sometimes she'd leave presents on my bed.
- We got along all through elementary school (she worked as an aide in my class in rd grade & in another class in 4th), and throughout middle school. We'd have minor squabbled but nothing huge.
- Freshman year started and we still got along pretty well. I was at the point where my parents embarrassed me, but that's normal for 14 and 15 year-olds.
- Sometime freshman year (towards the end, I believe) was when she started getting sick. I don't remember because I was oblivious and focused on myself, my schoolwork, and my friends. All I know is that as her health started faltering, so did our relationship. She became harder to deal with over the last 2 or so years of her life which coincided with my most teenage-ish years. She didn't understand how my teenage life was, and I didn't understand how sick she was until junior year. We were both stubborn and annoyed with each other. She changed as she got sicker; she wasn't my mother anymore. Her spirit and character had been deflated out of her and with that my love for her. I started hating her. I couldn't deal with her, or with having a sick mom. It was an imperfection, a blemish. I became moodier and depressed because I had to deal with her on top of everything else. When she died, I felt like a weight has been lifted off me. I felt little guilt. I had no literal mother now, but it didn't affect me too much because I hadn't seen my real mother (the woman she used to be) in years.

I started with bullets, but the last one ended up huge because I could no longer break it into segments. It was hard, because I don't really want to think about our relationship anymore, because I feel as if the death was some kind of resolution. Having a time limit helped to focus and not ramble

(even thought I doubt I would have). I wrote more than I expected to, which I guess is a good thing.

There were triggers at work here, I told her; feedback she appeared to attend to when she began to “follow the writing” instead of directing it herself. I also told her I suspected that her awareness of the time limit helped to “contain” the process; she need not be afraid that it would “spin out of control” because she “only had so much time to write.”

Now that we were back working within the confines of the school day, I was mindful of the need for closure and transition, because she had to walk out the door back into the hubbub of her school life. Therefore, we ended on a more positive note, talking about her running. The discipline necessary to be a good long-distance runner helped her “organize” her life even as she bemoaned the negative effects of competition. She felt “wild and free” when she was running during the summer. Now that the track season had begun, it was “back to pressure, to proving myself.” I acknowledged her previous comments about school-based writing; because of my conversations with her, I told her I had been thinking more and more about ways in which the behaviors required of academic analytical process were seemingly at odds with those that served the creative process.

Reflexivity Journal

It was hard today reading what Holly wrote about the changes in her relationship with her mother. I couldn't help remembering the year I was so sick, my (also only child) son's senior year of high school. I was not fatally ill, but he was often annoyed with me because I was not Supermom anymore, going to all of his games and making sure he could have friends over all the time. I was frustrated because he was not more supportive of my own struggle. In his mind, the timing could not have been worse; he was applying

to colleges and anxious about his future, and I was completely overwhelmed and confused by my unexplained illness. I know my illness scared him; it terrified me from time to time, even though I did my best to hide it. Fear compromises us; it makes us behave badly. I wish we had had some help at the time navigating all of those emotions.

Serena

In anticipation of the work ahead, this would be a session devoted almost entirely to talking and planning. As I always did, I asked Serena how her “senior year life” was going, code we had established as a reference to the “see-saw” of academic obligations and the college admissions process. She and Holly had almost completed their applications to Emerson; unlike Holly, however, she was not applying Early Decision because she was still unsure whether she could make that commitment by December. She wanted to “explore other options.” They had started to watch “The OC” on television again, and I had watched it as well, in order to discuss it with them. Serena found the “almost mindless plot” a “welcome diversion from the real world.”

She told me she had given “serious thought time” to the topic for the imaginal work and had decided to “at least start” with the issue of the relationship, knowing that she might “veer off” into something else depending on the “unknowns” of the creative process. After all, she had wanted to work on this project in order to learn more about how writing might help her “figure out more” about herself and in the process also learn more about her writing. I had thought she might appreciate the quote from James Merrill that I had kept on my desk while I was writing as an introduction to this journey we were about to take together. I read it to her.

“The point is to feel and keep the eyes open. Then what you feel is expressed, is mimed back at you by the scene. A room, a landscape. I’d go a step further. We don’t know what we feel until we see it distanced by this kind of translation.”

She was moved by several words. “Mimed” seemed to her a form of “reflecting in the body” that would be a “new approach, even though writing was a body thing too.” The idea that an imaginal scene could serve as a “translation” resonated with her. She had had this experience: she only knew what she felt when she saw it in some image in one of her poems. I told her that I hoped this task would invite her to enter this imaginal world and participate in an associative process in which she would be free to follow the lead of her images and gain access to her own intuitive non-verbal experience of what had happened to her. (See Appendix F for a description of the imaginal task and the directions). Even though she was already adept at differentiating between her own creative process and conventional academic interpretation and analysis, I felt it necessary to remind her to forgo premature considerations of form and allow it to emerge from the writing. Both of us acknowledged the deeply personal and creative nature of the task; it would be a challenge to undertake this endeavor within the confines of the “fragmented” school day. However, “desperate for anything free and unstructured” while she was in school, she was eager to try. She could not predict whether she would work on aspects of the task at home. We also discussed the two-part goal of the process: not only to have her be able to articulate her feelings but also to increase her capacity to tolerate the discomfort of ambiguity and intense feelings. I remembered how hard this had been when I was a teenager: I saw now that I went to great lengths to avoid feeling strong emotions. Now I was interested in learning more about how this spontaneous, unpredictable, seemingly random creative process might be therapeutic for those of us who have little experience “trusting the process.”

I also reminded her that this was collaboration. If she had the urge to work on the task but was not able to begin or had to stop working, what she could tell me about how and why that happened would be informative. We talked about “not being able to follow through” with an idea in writing, the “inadequacy of words.” She often had this experience: she would start with a “general” emotion and then the words that came to mind sounded “corny” and she would give up. She hoped that working with objects and images might help her “get past that point,” be a way of “getting at” the underlying feelings.

I suggested she begin by sitting “in the silence” with the general topic in mind and consider the list of questions as she attempted to create the scene and generate images she might record. (See Appendix E).

Serena sat silently for ten minutes or so, not writing, just “waiting,” as she often called the first phase of her writing process. I did not look at her directly during this confrontation with the blank page. Privately I wondered whether this aspect of the creative process were better undertaken with company or in solitude. I also wondered if she were having difficulty getting started because she had exhausted the topic, despite her protestations to the contrary. I was aware of my assumption that she was “having trouble” because she was not writing; I knew better. It was also possible that the time constraint was a factor; we had spent most of the session time talking.

Just before the session ended, I asked her these questions. She wasn’t worried. She was not going to jump to the conclusion that the process was not going well, this was a creative process, after all.

Holly

I came in to school the following week and the news reached me before she did: Holly had dropped out of a race in a significant meet, the District Invitational, for which she had been preparing rigorously for weeks. When she arrived at the office, she smiled weakly at me and said “I suppose you’ve heard; everyone else has.” My heart went out to her. Much as she sought the limelight and coveted the achievement of perfection, what “had to happen sooner or later” had played out in a painfully public arena.

I gathered there was a story. This day I offered her the choice: she could talk or write. It was still the same work, in many ways. There was what happened and what she had discovered (or was still discovering) about herself and others as a result of this experience. What would be the most effective way to represent it in words? Was it the story of it? A poem? A dialogue?

She needed to tell me what happened, first. The story. It was “the basis, the foundation that has to be there.” I already knew she was ambivalent about competitive running. Apparently, her body “just stopped, right in the middle of the race.” Her legs felt heavier and heavier and she saw everything “go to slow motion.” There was “no reason for it, no warning.” Ahhhh, no reason? I let that question hang out there in the silence. Here was feedback again, this time coming from her body. “It was just tired; it was that simple.” But of course. She didn’t like this process, “coming face to face with imperfection.” However, she acknowledged that it felt “like a positive thing” to quit, when she thought about it later. “I’m tired of being tired.” Her coach and some of the other runners were supportive, even though “they lost because of me.” What other kind of feedback had she gotten? She had gone on Livejournal when she got home that day

(the first thing she did when she got home every day) just to “put my version of the story out there, not to get comments because “she had already been told everything.” I drew her attention to the way in which she was still saying that she didn’t need anything from anyone else. Some people had supported her; she had not felt “judged” by everyone. Now perhaps she could refrain from judging herself. She had already begun to think more about feedback, she said. She felt “empty” when other writers did not respond on Livejournal; she thought it was because she had “gotten used to hearing you say things about my writing.” On that day, I sensed that she needed to rest “in the silence.” I suggested that she reflect on the race or its aftermath and allow images to come to her without any attempt to analyze or judge or choose them. She might observe her response to the images; I would not ask her to write about them, to put them into words. She seemed uncomfortable at first; when I made no move to fill the silence, she settled back in the chair and closed her eyes.

Reflexivity Journal

I read in Scott Peck’s obituary today that he had a breakdown of sorts when he was at Phillips Exeter; that kind of “cruel,” competitive environment made him sick. He collapsed for a period of time, went inward, and regained his equilibrium, centered himself, got in touch with an inner core of strength and conviction and talent and interests. Just what happened to me those last years with the English Department. Breakdowns are not all bad. Neither is it all bad to quit running a race. Honoring one’s body and its feedback is a positive thing. I know from personal experience all about having the body fail when it has been pushed too hard; finally it just refuses to do your (relentless, unhealthy) bidding, and it won’t lie for you any longer.

Serena

I started our next session on a collaborative note. I welcomed her suggestions because I had been thinking about “being stuck” after she mentioned it previously. She

said she felt as if the images were “nearby” but she “couldn’t get to them.” I suggested that it might be helpful to establish the context as we had done previously with the dialogue exercise. In writing a brief piece about the relationship itself, she might also gain some clarity about whether this topic was still what she wanted—or needed—to address in her writing. I suggested she write the “Steppingstones of the relationship” in no more than ten minutes. She drew in a deep breath and said, “Oh, God.” I asked her about her obvious trepidation, and she said, “This is going to be hard; I either write about the good stuff or the bad stuff; either way it is going to be hard.” However, she had “this sense” that her dread of it being hard was an indication that she was in the “territory” where she should be if she wanted to do the emotional work. In support of her instincts I reminded her that the foundation of our work here was this creative, open-ended exploratory process. I would keep her company as she learned to trust. Her first piece of writing was a narrative. She read it aloud when she finished writing.

The Story of the Relationship

Letting him in was either the greatest decision or the worst mistake I have ever made. I’m not quite sure yet. And in some ways, it wasn’t a choice at all. I have no control over my heart. It lies in wait for years, then once it finds someone it wants it screams “I want that one!” And latches on to him, refusing to let go no matter what the rest of me wants. It’s a stubborn five year-old in pig tails stomping around and slamming doors, at constant war with my brain. But like a child screaming for candy in a grocery store, it always wins. When I first fell for him, I refused to believe it. You can’t, I told myself. He’s one of your closest friends. You just can’t. You’re going to screw everything up. But it didn’t matter what my brain thought or wanted. It was far too late for me. The second I realized that it was too late seemed like fate. I was

decorating the Christmas tree, listening to my favorite band. Then that song played—one of those sappy love songs you can't help but love. The clock chimed 2. I sang along, hanging ornaments. And then it hit me. I'm in too deep. I want him and there's no turning back. And everything seemed meant to be, every number no matter which way I added or multiplied, seemed to tell me that this was it. Then we talked on the phone for hours.

Writing this was a lot easier than I thought. Maybe because I started from the very beginning, when all of the feelings were always good. I just wrote whatever popped into my head at first, trying to use metaphors (because I love them) and then it just seemed to fall into place.

After she read this process write aloud, she acknowledged the feedback she had received. "I got off easy just writing about the good stuff; I could hear that when I read it to you." Therefore, I suggested she try another time-limited piece in Steppingstone form. I reminded her to write about the "essence" of the *entire* relationship, how the situation was at its core between them.

She was not writing as energetically this time; this process was obviously more challenging. She stopped and started again; I waited in the silence with her.

The Essence of the Relationship

- Somebody I felt close to
- Never had that awkward first going out feeling
- I never said how I felt, good or bad
- He always acted happy even when he wasn't
- Hugs
- He never kissed me...ehhh
- One tiny thing could happen and I'd mull over it for a week

- We never had time to spend together
- He made me feel safe
- People treated us like a zoo exhibit
- He didn't even want to try to fix things
- We got along perfectly
- No matter what else was happening, it didn't matter, I would be happy as long as I could be with him
- I was too quiet

After she read this list aloud, Serena commented that the list form that had “just come to her” seemed to enable her to “cover more ground.” After she read the process write out loud to me, she said she got more “feedback” about “the real ups and downs” of their time together. She had math on her mind from a test that morning; Serena wondered aloud what form a graph of the relationship would take.

This was harder than last time because it wasn't telling exactly what happened, but more getting at the essence of it. It was also more painful to do also because I wasn't just writing about the good things, and I actually came up with more bad ones than good.

Holly

Holly was waiting for me when I arrived several days later at the high school. She was ready to “move on with this image work.” However, she had one thing to tell me. She had made a decision not to run in the meet that afternoon. There were only two more meets in the season, but she was more interested in going to the student council meeting. She had talked with her coach, however, rather than just not show up because that would be “cowardly; I hate it when people do that.” She found it interesting that she left her running shoes at home “accidentally” the day before when she had practice, just as she

had been afraid she would. “Even my shoes are giving me feedback.” She was apprehensive about what some of the other runners would say when they realized she “meant what she said.”

Given her interest in returning to our work with images in writing, I had her re-read what she had written about her mother in previous sessions as a way of re-entering the “imaginal mindspace.” The goal was not analysis and interpretation, rather the emergence of one of many, many images she carried with her. Everything that has happened to her was stored as image. Her mother’s death. What her mother was like in her childhood. Which images came to her mind’s eye were significant.

In the context of her relationship with her mother, I invited her to consider a childhood memory that had a place and an event associated with it. In the process of considering “place” she might summon sensory data and the descriptive mode while “event” would afford her the opportunity to “begin with story of some kind.” In the imaginal world, everything was simultaneously present and narrative was a way of “getting around” in that space in order to know it more fully.

She was reluctant to begin writing about the first image that “kept coming to her” because it “seemed too silly, not really important.

The thing that constantly comes to mind when I think of my relationship with my mother is this place near my house that’s in the same building complex as a liquor store and The Blueberry Muffin. It’s not there anymore; some other store took it over. It was called the Village Café and even though it’s been gone for years, I can still see the sign in my head. It was red and rectangular with gold writing. The image is that sign and then inside. There was a semicircle counter with those padded spinny [sic] stools around it. My mom would take me there during the summer. (I can remember not having too many friends in elementary school that I hug out with). She’d sit in the car and I’d go in and get an ice cream. They had the one’s that Ziggy’s has—vanilla soft serve with swirls of flavor. [here she drew a picture with her pen of an ice cream cone and labeled the swirls].

You could get different flavors of soft serve ice cream instead of just the basic chocolate and vanilla. For some reason, I kept tasting the one with the orange flavor stuff, the one that tasted like a creamsicle. I'm not sure if I ever even got that one. But that's the one I see myself getting, and that's the one I can taste. She never came in with me, but I always knew she was out in the car waiting. And I have no idea when the café got taken over, either; all I know is that it's gone now, and pretty much nobody remembers it.

When she finished writing, I asked her if she would read this piece aloud to me so that I might enter the image with her. She was reluctant, as usual; this time I pressed her and she agreed. However, as it would transpire for some time to come when she consented to read aloud, she wasn't actually reading but paraphrasing very rapidly, as if sidestepping potential land mines in the words she had written. She said she "heard so much symbolism" when she re-read what she had written. I was loathe to return to the intellectualism of academic interpretation. However, she insisted this was "different." She had not consciously invented anything in this image as a symbol; rather aspects of the image she had written about "make me think of more parts of what happened than I thought I would." For example, she was intrigued that the flavor came to her and that the sign was significant, given her interest in "signs of all kinds, even the magical ones." She could sense the bittersweet nostalgia of the memory, akin to how she remembered her mother "always waiting" in the car. I told her this experience of connecting with images was called "importing," in which some aspect of the image felt familiar or particularly significant. Most importantly to her, this image reminded her of her mother before she was ill and highlighted the changes that "made her seem like two people, two different mothers." It occurred to her that many relationships probably had this "before and after" quality to them. I suggested that she explore this duality next and suggested that she hold

the “before and after” in her mind and record the images that came to her. They need not be familiarly associated with her mother; rather, they might be suggestive of other inner aspects of the relationship.

Before

Golden retriever
 Playdoh
 Yellow and purple heart I made in 1st grade
 Orange swirl ice cream
 The smell of the houses she used to clean
 My soft blanket
 Being chased by those ducks in NH when I was 3 or 4
 Light blue, yellow, orange

After

A pitiful little dog from the pound
 Oozy mud
 Ice cubes and ginger ale
 Her purple sweatpants and shirt
 Red
 Sand paper

This list helped, although I don’t quite know how yet. I just thought and let things come to me. Most of them were either part of past memories or images that I associated with her. Splitting into two categories helped massively, and I thought it was weird how I came up with more “befores” than “afters” when the “after” was the more problematic time. I know the “before” was longer, but it still surprised me.

Reflexivity Journal

It has been so moving, working with Holly around this issue of “two mothers.” I didn’t realize it at her age, but I was struggling with how to understand the changes I was watching in my own mother, due to what I now understand as the illness of alcoholism. There was no time for grief; all of my energy was consumed in adapting to the shifting

terrain. And then finally the resolution I constructed: go it alone, independently. I told myself I didn't need her; what I needed she couldn't give me anymore.

They all live without mothers; we are all daughters.

Serena

Serena and I were spending less time talking and more time writing now during our session time. She was ready to work, having read the “directions” yet again just prior to arriving for the session. I told her she could “widen” her view and try to see a scene or represent the relationship as an object.

She was, in fact, excited that the imaginal scene had just “popped “ into her head. It was a “real” place that seemed to “take on” additional properties that “made it seem symbolic without my trying.”

Up the tiny slope of a small hill sits a wooden two-person swing. Hard, white snow sits at its base and covers the grass all around it, the kind where if you walk on it your feet fall through, crunching through the pure white. The air is bitter cold, but the sun still shines brightly over the snow, blinding anyone with its white reflection. The swing creaks with the slightest breeze. It is gray and aged-looking as though it has been there for decades. It sits there, reflecting on the view from the top of the hill. It sees the snow, the sun in the distance, all the surrounding trees and houses that don't seem to notice it. Everything is quiet—no birds chirping, no children playing nearby, no cars passing by. Nothing but silence. The swing stands still as the air remains calm. People used to sit there. But now it stands alone.

After Serena read this piece aloud, she was more animated than I had seen her before. She said she could hear from the feedback in her own voice that this image could “teach her things.” This sounded like an invitation to dialogue to both of us. She was

eager to approach the image of the swing from that perspective, and wanted to hear the dialogue I had conducted with the tree in my own image, given how “weird” it was to think of talking to a swing. I told her that my own experience with these written dialogues was an opportunity to dispel that “otherness” and “make the strange familiar” even as working with her image of the swing would also “make the familiar strange” in order to learn from it.

I told her that my own first step had been to establish the context of the dialogue in order to further amplify the image. This piece was about “edges” and referenced to a photographic image of a tree at the water’s edge with exposed roots, one in a number of photos I had taken on this subject. As I prepared for the dialogue, I “wrote myself toward it.”

What is to be learned from things that live at the edge? They get very good at finding sustenance. They absorb light and nutrients where ever they can get them. A metaphor for the writing process. We use what we know, have in store, but there is always the venturing out. The willingness to venture into the unknown in search of that which will sustain. There is also a being true to one’s nature. A tree is always a tree, can only do tree things, no matter what. I doubt, however, that it sees those “tree things” as limitations. Rather they are they only things it can do and they are enough. They fulfill their purpose. And then it is over. I would love to know how they “know” what it is they are supposed to do.

The dialogue script would write itself; I needed to trust the dialogue script to find its own way. I read the dialogue aloud to her.

C: I have taken all these pictures of you. They show your roots spreading in all directions. How did you come to be there?

T: There is no asking that question; I am here because this is where I belong.

C: Is there a time when you know you are at the edge?

T: I don't think of it as an edge; it is just where I am. I have no need to name the place where I find myself.

C: But surely there must come a time when you realize that the way you are living is changing.

T: There is the fullness of time. I am absorbed in the business of living and the changes that are required of me are slow; I have the time to learn what I need to know.

C: But there must be some pattern you follow

T: NO, I am just a seeker. I seek what I need and sometimes I find it. Not always. You see that some of the bare roots go nowhere. They are also seeking but not everyone find what it is they are looking for. They are still making the effort, however, and that helps the tree.

C: Is that why some roots are bigger and stronger?

T: Yes, but the size does not guarantee anything. Sometimes the bigger roots are more easily compromised. The smaller ones are sometimes more able to do the twisting and turning that is required to hang on. They are not as strong but they are more flexible.

C: Do you know anything about how edges become edges?

T: Remember, I do not name things. Things are just what they are. Then I find a way to adapt.

C: Do you make choices about what to do?

T: I suppose that the roots are making choices, depending on their size and capability. Perhaps the path of least resistance. Or the path that seems to offer light or the water we need. But we can be wrong, be mislead. Just as you are. It is simpler for us to know or remember what we need to have in order to live, to thrive. But there are no guarantees. Bad things happen. The shoreline keeps receding no matter what we need. Remember those trees that were in front of your house. That bank was not going to last; eventually they would end up in the water. The water has its own purposes too. Sometimes we are working together, but sometimes not. On this shore, the water will win. It's just a question of time.

C: But there seem to be shores on this lake that will not erode; where trees can live for much longer.

T: Yes, that is true. Everywhere but here, on this bluff, or where the water turns into waves. It is different living in a place where you face constant storms.

C: That sounds like how I have lived my life. What can I learn from you?

T: The choices you make when you face storms are different. They are more urgent. There is this knowing that nothing is permanent. There is more leaning. Conservation. But never a thought to why me on this side? Why am I not the huge thriving tree next door that will never die or be cut down? How ridiculous, what you people do to use up all that energy with that. When you could be nourishing your roots.

C: There are so few plants that can survive here. Why is that?

T: The wind is even more difficult than the water. The wind tears away leaves, exerts so much pressure that it is hard to stay upright and rooted. It is almost more than we can bear sometimes.

C: What do the plants that can thrive here have in common?

T: They are simple. Reduced to the bare essentials. Forsythia, for example, blooms gloriously for a short time. The rest of the time it just endures. Sturdy, not adorned...but there is that show every spring. More than many plants can muster. There is a tenacity.

Far from finding it “weird,” Serena was deeply moved by this piece, “in awe” of the words the tree had spoken. She was ready to try it. I asked her to return to her written piece with a highlighter, as I had, and mark words or phrases that seemed significant.

Up the tiny slope of a small hill sits a wooden two-person swing. Hard, white snow sits at its base and covers the grass all around it, the kind where if you walk on it your feet fall through, crunching through the pure white. The air is bitter cold, but the sun still shines brightly over the snow, blinding anyone with its white reflection. The swing creaks with the slightest breeze. It is gray and aged-looking as though it has been there for decades. It sits there, reflecting on the view from the top of the hill. It sees the snow, the sun in the distance, all the surrounding trees and houses that don't seem to notice it. Everything is quiet—no birds chirping, no children playing nearby, no cars passing by. Nothing but silence. The swing stands still as the air remains calm. People used to sit there. But now it stands alone.

She would return to the marked words; however, she felt ready to approach the swing. She wrote without stopping, telling me later that it “just flowed out.” When she had finished, I had her read it aloud.

S: You see everything, don't you?

Swing: (creaks as if nodding)

S: Do you think you could tell me anything?

Swing: What do you want to know?

S: Why I can't get rid of these feelings. I mean, are they supposed to be there? Is it meant to be?

Swing: You'll never really know until it happens. Or until it doesn't happen. Maybe you'll never know at all.

S: It's cold.

Swing: It always is. I like it.

S: But it's lonely, isn't it?

Swing: Yes, but it's just like waiting. I'll wait for the sun to melt the snow away and warm me up and maybe someday I'll have company again.

S: Is that all you do, wait?

Swing: usually. Sometimes it feels like I'll stay forever that way. I'll always be cold and no one will ever come. But other times I know I'll change someday.

S: But when will it change?

Swing: You just have to wait.

S: I don't like waiting.

Swing: I gathered that. But sometimes you just have to. Because it's the only thing you can do.

Both of us had heard things in our dialogues that were “not necessarily” what we wanted to hear. She marveled at the “unmistakable truth” in the last phrase, “it’s the only thing you can do.” It was “different, hearing those words from the swing.” There was a “wiseness” that she felt compelled to consider. She also felt supported in that her dialogue had contained what she perceived as affirmation of her struggle. This had been a watershed day. Serena would go on to write a series of dialogues, each of which would nudge her closer to an acceptance of their patient guidance.

Holly

That day, Holly wanted to try to work with another “memory image” from her childhood, one that she had noted on her “before” list. It was an image with a place and an event associated with it. I reminded her to “free write,” to return to the image and ask it where it would like to take her, make herself available and then be willing to follow it. I reminded her to attend to colors and textures and sounds in order to bring the image into sharper focus. The addition of sensory details would “flesh it out.” I mentioned the tendency to “take refuge” in narrative, already familiar with the distancing that happened when she just told the story of “what happened” as opposed to the more deliberate “staying in” of attentiveness that would happen when she had to write descriptively. I also cast this task in terms of her audience: she should add as many descriptive details as

possible so that I would be able to experience this place and what happened there as she did. Where were her parents? What were they doing? I emphasized the constructive aspect of our collaborative process: the other person's "need to see" may substitute for one's own, help her move beyond any hesitation. The more specific details she included, the more opportunities for further amplification, probing the significance of this event.

When I was about 3, I went to New Hampshire with my parents. We stayed at the Sheraton (I remember because it looked like a castle) and there was a park nearby. I believe it was kind of cloudy and there was a little pond. I may have been feeding the ducks, I don't remember, but I got scared because the ducks and geese started to chase me and I had to run and climb on top of this big grey rock until my mom came and got me. It felt like I was waiting forever on top of that rock, since I was so young, but in reality I'm betting it was only a minute or so. The ground was greenish and it was slightly chilly out; I think I had a windbreaker on. My parents are somewhere, but in my memory, I can't see them [once again, as before, she drew a diagram of her placement in the surroundings] so they were off to the side somewhere. I don't remember exactly how I got off that rock but I know my mom got me off it.

This time I made a copy of her piece *before* she read it aloud. As I had suspected, she was not reading verbatim; rather, she talked *about* the piece, looking at the copy and paraphrasing very rapidly. These asides had the effect of distancing her from the memory image. When she was recounting the memory, her voice took on an almost childlike quality, as if she would speak in baby talk at any minute. I shared this observation with her; perhaps the reading aloud felt risky? She was more concerned that there were "always things I leave out in the writing that I need to explain."

In the spirit of less (academic) explanation and further (sensory imaginal) description, I suggested that she return to the piece in order to "amplify" the image, as if

she were using a telephoto camera lens in order to bring it closer into view. She could use one of the colored highlighters I always set out for the girls in a jar on their side of the desk and mark words or phrases that were particularly suggestive of the sensory aspects of the image: the grass, the rock, the pond or the light, what it smelled like there. She should suspend her academic “analytic, literary, interpretive mind”; nothing in the image need be symbolic or representative of “something else” at this stage.

She chose to write further about two of the words.

Run

I can remember running from the stupid birds the most. I can feel my little legs moving as fast as they could in order to find safety on the rock. I can feel the windbreaker moving & the arm swishing against the side of my body. I keep seeing/looking at the ground on the right side of me, like my head is tilted.

Cloudy

I know for a fact that the sun wasn't totally out that day. The cloudy setting made the air cooler. The sky was grayish, but there wasn't necessarily rain in the air.

As would happen on numerous occasions with all of the girls, the arbitrary time limit on our sessions was restrictive. Holly and I agreed that the process was not finished or complete at this point, but the period was coming to a close. We would return to this piece and these words; she might consider “sitting with them” as they appeared on the page and “following their lead.” This was the routine, suggested extensions of the session activities. Occasionally she arrived with something she had written, usually a poem, but Holly rarely went back to the pieces she had written during session time; she

didn't want to do that "alone." It was significant that she acknowledged her need of company.

Reflexivity Journal

I have always identified with product instead of process. It's how I was prepared in school from the beginning; everything I did was about a goal of some kind (getting into a "good" college comes to mind immediately). Remove the "objective" and I could barely function. This was a huge insight for Holly; it explained some of her trouble (and the annoying "voices" she heard) when she sat down to write a poem that didn't come easily. Why are you wasting time like this?? For what? they would ask. As if a process is not useful unless something tangible emerges from it. Lately I allow myself to entertain the notion that process is innately valuable and worthwhile. The "product" might be something less tangible: flow, improved well-being, Buddhist equanimity. But an outcome nevertheless. Perhaps "tangible" and "intangible" are not accurate; what I was taught to value were products that were external, thereby enhancing my own perceived value in the social context in which I would have to live and work. The joy I might experience in throwing pots or playing the piano or painting (and not preparing for a show or recital) seemed inconsequential by comparison. Particularly if I were not "good" at these things. I am remembering [a friend's] remark about classes she ran for the "deliriously happy" women who "played" for hours without caring about making "something."

Serena

Several things were "going on," there was "tons of teenage angst these last few days." In reply to several of her friends' postings on livejournal, Serena had posted an entry about how no one says what he or she really feels. She took a risk and dared them to say something specific about how they feel instead of just writing generalities. This was met with silence: no one replied. She found it "not comforting but revealing" of how scary a prospect it is to actually talk about feelings. So much depended on who was asking and who was listening. She was glad she had at least "put the point out there." I reminded her that a version of this situation was one of the major reasons I undertook this study: I had no one to talk to—and no one asked-- about how I felt as a teenager and,

thirty-five years later, I suspected there was a link between that “habit of silence” and my illnesses.

We began our work of the day with the swing scene. I noted a number of sensory elements in her description. For example, how might it be significant that the scene was a cold, snowy one and not situated in the balmy summer? What could the snow reveal to her? I suggested that she begin by writing a more detailed description of a particular sensory element in order to amplify its properties. This was another opportunity to “trust the process” of “making the strange familiar.” She should follow any associations that evolved. It was always possible that a dialogue would emerge, particularly if she found herself with questions to ask, as she had discovered in the previous exercise.

She wrote a description of the snow that did lead her into a dialogue.

White, hard snow covers the ground like cement, an encasement over the grass that makes one wonder if it was ever there at all...and what exactly is the color green? The snow glitters in the sunlight, speckles of ivory, blue, and purple. It hurts to look at it. Stepping on it, your foot falls through it with a soft crunch. But the snow forgives you. The sun seems resistant to melt it away; it is hardened and tired.

S: Why are you here?

Snow: I think I have always been here. There were so many blizzards. I fell such a long time ago and here I am.

S: But you never seem to leave.

Snow: I'm sick of being here. Sick of being cold. The sun warms me a bit but refuses to melt me away.

S: Is that what you want? To be gone?

Snow: That's not the point. I won't really be gone. I'll be vapor, then stuck in a cloud until I fall again.

S: You want to be something different?

Snow: Why not? It beats sitting here doing nothing and being cold. I'd rather go somewhere, be something instead of just a cold white vision.

Serena started with the description, and then the snow "seemed to have its own personality" and the dialogue "took over." She was intrigued by the "open perspective" of the snow even though it "seemed stuck," which was something she could "relate to." She had not thought it possible to be "open to being open" while still "feeling stuck": she had always thought the two "states" would "cancel each other out." This was important feedback: Serena "heard" the snow tell her to "get up off her rear end and do something different." Ironically, she didn't feel annoyed as she did when her friends told her to "get over it." How did she explain the difference? In this case, the snow's words were "coming from inside, me speaking to myself; I can't deny that." She took this as another affirmation that she had "not closed down completely."

I pointed out that we had not analyzed or interpreted the images in any conventional academic sense. Rather she had identified instances of "conjunction," those affinities or connections or a sense of familiarity with aspects of an image that are undeniable and particularly significant. We would note them but not analyze them. They were doing their work without any attempt on our part to "figure them out." The fact that they happened and she allowed them to "do their own work" was all we were after, where the therapeutic benefit was.

Serena was “amazed at the power of this simplicity.” She had not had to struggle to come to the realizations that emerged in this “little talk with snow,” and yet she felt “something inside her give way.” Once again, the feedback was “not necessarily” what she wanted to hear, but she felt she had been heard. And she had been “forced” to listen to herself! That voice of hers was telling her to “do something different.” She wanted to try another approach to this image. This time she chose the element of air.

The air is so cold, the kind that bites at your skin and turns your hands into icicles. Wind whips by like a hard slap across the face. Exhaling leaves a small white fog that disperses throughout the chilly atmosphere. You can’t wait to be outside in this bitter air. Skin aches for the warmth of indoors and asks you “what am I doing out here?” You want to be inside, snuggling with your cat under a blanket with a mug full of hot cocoa. But for some reason or another, you have to be out here and you stay. And you know once you finally do go inside there won’t be any blankets or cocoa or fuzzy purring cats. You’ll just go back to normal life like you were never out here and were never this cold.

I think I was kind of jumping out of my body and telling this to myself. I feel like I wasn’t addressing a separate audience, but I still used the word “you.” It was like I was trying to explain the situation to myself because there is some part of me that doesn’t understand.

There was conflict in this piece, yet another representation of the struggle she knew all too well. This one played itself out in terms of heat and chill. Even though it did not take shape as a dialogue, she could feel and “hear” the unmistakable exchange. What further conjunctions could she identify? The question “What am I doing out here?” seemed “so obvious, given the cold” it almost made her cry, because “I just can’t allow myself to get comfortable, can I? I just stay out there.” She was particularly struck by the

“speaker’s” assumption that there would be no comfort if she were to go back inside.

“What kind of crap is that? I don’t want to be that kind of person, that negative.” She was taken aback by my next question. Who was responsible for establishing the comfort she needed? “I guess I always thought it should be someone else taking care of me. Even though it’s all me now that I live with my dad. But I never take the time to do it for myself; I just sit around and feel bad that I’m alone.” This would be the “return to normal” she had written about “as if you were never out here,” with no acknowledgment of how “cold” she felt. Instead, what one step could she take to do something different and comfort herself? She laughed ruefully. “I don’t even know what I need, although I guess I started a list in this last thing I wrote.”

Holly

True to form, when I asked her if she had returned to the piece she had written, Holly said she had “lost her train of thought.” Did she have any thoughts about losing thoughts? There were always “so many things getting in the way of slowing down enough” to do “this kind of thinking.” Ahhh, this was encouraging: she was differentiating between ways of considering experience: what we were concerned with here was perhaps more aptly called “reflection.” What conditions made reflection more likely? Quiet, no obligations, no one rushing her. Company. She still struggled with “where to start.” I suggested this was a customary trepidation that accompanied the confrontation with the blank page or more challenging material. She preferred not to be uncomfortable in that way and often found herself avoiding tasks that asked her to “start from scratch, when no one gives me a topic or an idea.” I was, indeed, familiar with this

struggle, yet another seemingly inevitable by-product of rigorous academic training and expectations.

I had two objectives in the course of this conversation. I thought it might be helpful to her to talk about ways of responding to “triggers,” that intangible, unpredictable but unmistakable feedback process that she had previously likened to “a jolt when something is dislodged” by music or a word or a phrase or a line in a poem and “the train of thought takes off.” She was intrigued by it even as she was reluctant to “get on the train.” If the conditions were favorable to such a creative reflective process and she chose to participate, she would need to “tolerate” this discomfort. As an illustrative example, I shared M.C. Richards’ (1989) metaphor of the “centering and de-centering” process in ceramics from her book *Centering*. Holly had never actually thrown a pot on the wheel but had seen it done. Her eyes got wide as we pictured together the piece of clay wobbling as it took shape in the potter’s hands. The new piece was not always centered on the wheel; a certain amount of de-centering was necessary for the success of the final pot. The process depended on the potter’s struggle to remain flexible and maintain the balance, all the while not allowing the piece (or herself by association) to become un-centered and fall off or apart. Holly was entranced by this metaphor, as I had been when I first read about it. In picturing the potter at work, the “usual fear” she felt about the uncertainty of the creative process seemed “just part of how it is supposed to be, not just my own out-of-control weirdness.”

Perhaps surrendering to this experience of the “flow” of the creative process might be for her an alternative response to what Wallace Stevens (1942) called the “pressure of reality.” What might she learn about herself if she were more attentive to

the feedback from “triggers” as they presented themselves and then took pains to affirm and protect the conditions necessary to sustain her own “pottery practice”? In fact, a number of psychologists suggested that the experience of *flow* (which she readily understood from her non-competitive running experiences) was, in fact, necessary to our health and well-being. In this case, the metaphoric connection with the ceramics process and its entailments “triggered” what she experienced as recognition followed by release, an “opening” to experience in a less anxious, more creative way.

I also drew an analogy to an episode of a TV show she and Serena watched regularly that I had begun watching at their invitation in order to participate in their discussions. In a eerie example of synchronicity, the character Marissa had been asked to write about an excruciatingly painful memory for her college essay and she was “completely paralyzed” when she sat down to start the piece. As Holly saw it, Marissa could not write “at first” about what happened to her because the images overwhelmed her. “The writing process makes you go so deep and there is the possibility of getting it wrong, blaming yourself” if no one were there to hear it. She believed that this showed that writers need company; they need help “breaking things down first to get to the point where you can write about bad things.” She saw the connection with her recent painful loss; there was “a fine line between not being able to write because it is too soon and then fooling yourself into thinking that you don’t *need* to write.” Marissa “must have seen something her herself” in Johnny, another character in the show, who was a “survivor.” This helped her “move past her fear of those images.” Perhaps Johnny was functioning as a metaphor of her more resilient self? Holly recognized that Marissa would not be able to write about those images until she “named” what she saw.

We had arrived at our task for this day. It was Friday, the day on which her AP English teacher gave the class a poem every week for them to “react and respond to: Sylvia Plath’s “Mirror.” It was a poem I had taught many times, one the students usually appreciated. I suggested we consider the mirror and the other reflective surfaces in the poem in the context of our discussion of metaphor. Here were images of reflective surfaces that were, in turn, serving to illustrate how images themselves might reflect much more than initially appeared to be present. Perhaps she might now use the “iso-principle” that poetry therapists utilized in their practice and approach the poem in search of personally significant connections to words and phrases. She had “forgotten” this way of reading poems; she used to record favorite lines in a journal. She chose one from this poem almost without hesitation: *She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.* “It reminds me of those last days with my mother; the only thing I got for all of my waiting on her.”

Serena

In the interval between our sessions, Serena had been doing her “homework.” She had established a “little ritual” of making herself some hot tea or cocoa when she got home from school and “sitting down with it, not just heading for the computer.” The act of “making myself stare into space” had been “incredibly annoying” at first but she didn’t give up. She was pleased to discover that she wasn’t just “running all those same thoughts through my head.” Instead, she “caught” herself “being lame again” and had started looking over old poems she had written while she sipped. She had brought one in to work with this day, the poem “Loophole” she had read aloud in a previous session. She had experienced a powerful response to the Plath poem “Mirror” as well and thought

she could identify “weird” connections between that poem and her own she wanted to explore.

She had been courageous enough to “open the door” to her imaginal world, and the images were trying to get her attention. I invited her to consider this perspective: in a sense, everything was an image. Dreams could feel as “real” as anything in the office we were sitting in. In the same fashion, I was an image to her; she was an image to me. The earrings she had on reminded me of my mother; therefore, images of my mother were with us, between us. Seen and known as image, imaginal, everything was full of mirroring reflection. From this, Serena began to see the relationship as image. She was beginning to approach the process of closure “in stages, like one image at a time: getting over *him* (all of those images taken at once) was “way too big,” but getting over *the breakup* was “only a few images right in front of me, more manageable.”

I suggested that she return to her poem and identify one or two words or phrases that felt as if they would feed back as “triggers” for additional writing. This was the amplification stage in order to “open” the images so that I would be able to see them as she saw them. Dialogue was not the work of this moment. I told her that she did not have to read the entire poem; if something “pulled on her” she should go with that right then.

“the shore was safe”

“but it eroded into nothing”

The shore was once there, firm and stable. I could bury my toes into the soft sand and feel the warm glow of sunlight. But the waves of this quiet river slowly began to eat away at the shore. The water moved faster, taking away grains of sand along with it. And by the time I noticed, the shore was gone and I’m left standing in the cold, rapid

water, looking back, desperate to see that shore again. And I can picture it so clearly in my mind that it's as if it is still there, but every time I look it is still gone.

When she read her initial description aloud, I realized that the shore was a river shore! This was not what I had envisioned from the original poem, further evidence of the individuality of images and the conjunctions that others establish. We were both intrigued with this development. I suggested she amplify the images further, and I re-read the guideline questions about sensory elements in a scene. She would have more to work with: it was all in the details. In the second piece, the river and its banks emerged into view. After Serena read this piece aloud, I asked her to return to both pieces and highlight words and phrases that seem “significant.”

The river is clear, moving fast both away from and towards an empty horizon. A few gray rocks peek out above the rapid waters. On one side is nothing—before there was a warm sandy shore but now it is blank, white, erased. This side of the river seems to have no end. But on the other side is another shore, warm and inviting but seemingly so far away. The waters are discouraging for anyone to try to reach the other side, where there is sand and grass and tall trees. It's full of life. It seems to be early spring—there's a slight chill in the air but it's bearable. Besides the green on the other side, the colors are monochromatic. The water is clear, and the sky is light gray, almost as though they bleed into each other. But despite the lack of sunlight, it is still somewhat bright. The only sound is of the running waters of the river, gushing past.

We had an extended amount of time to work this day. Therefore, I suggested that she continue to write about this scene and choose a word or phrase as a “topic.” She should begin by “entering” the word as an image, announcing her presence by describing

it more fully. This was an invitation to it to see if the word had something more to say.

She should wait with the word, expectantly.

Monochromatic—all the same. All one color. One gray rushes by only to lead to another even the vast gray that swallows everything whole. There is nothing in them, nothing beyond them. Just clean, clear gray. They loop around each other and lead to nothing. It's all the same. This endless sky over this endless river. They don't ask questions of each other or anything else. They are silent. They coexist, realizing their bond and yet not acknowledging it. They may have voices but they choose not to use them. Either they don't know anything or they refuse to tell it.

Having read aloud a rich description of “monochromatic” grayness, I suggested she return to the piece she had just written “one last time.” She should re-read it to herself while inviting dialogue, asking the word if it had anything more to tell her about “being gray.” The result was a “conversation” among three voices, which startled and delighted her. Even more “unfamiliar,” hers was not the initiating voice.

River: Why do you bother us?

Sky: We're very busy.

River: That's not true.

S: You can't tell me anything?

Sky: There's nothing to tell.

River: Honestly...

S: Don't you get sick of being the same?

Sky: Do you get sick of it?

S: Sure.

River: I like it.

Sky: It's just the way it is.

S: Are you two friends?

River: Yes.

Sky: No.

River: Both.

Sky: Neither.

S: So you just sit here and do nothing?

River: No, I'm very productive.

Sky: Sometimes the sun comes out.

River: No, it doesn't.

Sky: It used to.

S: Shouldn't there be something more?

River: That's what the other side of me is for.

“There were patterns showing up” in these dialogues, she noted. She kept asking the same questions and receiving the same responses: sometimes “things are the way they are and all you do is wait.” She was intrigued with the notion of “crossing the river to that other side” but wasn’t sure just how she would accomplish that feat “yet.”

Holly

I could not have anticipated what would come to pass in the next two weeks, nearing the end of our time together. The gifts of synchronicity are an endless source of pleasure and affirmation. No matter how many times they arrive, I am always stunned. The day of our next session, Holly came running up to me in the hall outside the office. The poem of the day in her English class was “The Wayfarer” by Stephen Crane.

*The wayfarer,
Perceiving the pathway to truth,
Was struck with astonishment.
It was thickly grown with weeds.
“Ha,” he said.
“I see that no one has passed here
In a long time.”
Later he saw that each weed
Was a singular knife.
“Well,” he mumbled at last,
“Doubtless there are other roads.”*

She told me she had been “jumping out of my skin” ever since her teacher had passed the poem out that morning. The speaker in the poem even said “ha” as she did! The iso-principle at work: here was her own avoidance of “the path of knowing things I don’t want to know” just because “the weeds look like knives.” But they were *not* knives; it was just the way they appeared to the speaker! “Sure the truth hurts, but you can’t go through life just turning back all the time because you see things that aren’t there.” We had very little time this day, due to a scheduled assembly. “If” she were to write, she said she had already chosen the line *each weed was a singular knife*. Holly saw the weeds as “particular sharp-edged things that have happened.” She would work with the word “knife” as metaphor, with its fearful associations of “cutting and cutting off.” She had been most excited about the “obvious” metaphor and her ability to identify and

“relate to it on more than just the academic level.” I could not have structured a more productive discovery process. It was much more significant to her because I had not “planned” the poem. Instead, I had encouraged her to “just wait and see” what might happen if she had an attitude of expecting something she needed to come to her. This was validation for both of us of the power of “trusting the process.”

We were unable to meet until Friday of the following week, and we were not disappointed. The poem was one I was not familiar with but was, nevertheless, equally “shivery” in its relevance. Entitled “I Remember My Father’s Hands” and written by Lisa Suhair Majaj. Holly saw immediately that it might be “even more useful.”

I Remember My Father’s Hands

*because they were large, and square,
fingers chunky, black hair like wire*

*because they fingered worry beads and over
(that muted clicking, that constant motion, that
secular prayer)*

*because they ripped bread with quiet purpose,
dipped fresh green oil like a birthright*

*because after his mother’s funeral they raised a tea cup,
set it down untouched, uncontrollably trembling*

*because when they trimmed hedges, pruned roses,
their tenderness caught my breath with jealousy*

*because once when I was a child they cupped my face,
dry and warm, flesh full and calloused, for a long moment*

because over his wife’s still form they faltered

great mute helpless beasts

*because when his own lungs filled and sank they
reached out
for the first time pleading*

*because when I look at my hands
his own speak back*

I made two copies of the poem, one with the “scholarly” notations whited out in order for her to return to the poem without her “analytical hat” on. Now we had an opportunity to approach the poem as we might in conventional poetry therapy practice. I suggested she paraphrase the title and compose a list that would finish the sentence “I Remember My Mother’s_____.” She would begin with the literal, follow a train of thought, and have no intention to organize chronologically, interpret or judge. This poem described the appearance and function of objects to communicate what he remembered of his father. The image of the shaky teacup, for example, conveyed what could not be easily said out loud.

In this application of the iso-principle, my primary objective was to facilitate an associative process, another opportunity to “trust” the process. As it was, she wrote in fits and starts, clearly uncomfortable at times. At one point she asked me if every item on the list had to be “negative things.” Did she think a question about “rules and requirements” was revealing? The only “assignment” was to respond to the revised title. In the end, it took her only a few minutes to compose a rather lengthy list.

I Remember My Mother's.....

- Garden Manager sweatshirt
- cooking
- yelling at me to get off the computer
- angry face whenever I yelled back
- having difficulty walking towards the end
- bring proud of my report card
- face at Confirmation
- trying to ask me how things went when I got home
- seizures
- chapstick
- driving me to work
- growing smaller
- yelling at my neighbors when they were mean to me
- not understanding why I had to do so many activities
- at the viewing
- volunteering when I was in elementary school
- hair
- watching me and my friends when they came over to my house
- teeth
- weakness
- ice cubes

When she had finished writing, there was a noticeable change in her affect. The jaunty cheer was gone; instead she looked solemn and wary. I told her that I was going to ask her to read her list aloud this time. However, I delayed purposely to give her some time to get accustomed to the idea. I asked her to go back and establish a chronology for the items on the list before she read it. I hoped these activities would give her time to prepare and feel more grounded. I also asked her about her writing process. She replied that “images and situations kept coming up pretty easily” even though several of them reminded her of “painful circumstances.”

She was reluctant, as usual, to read her list out loud. For the first time, I did not relent. Taking a calculated risk, I suggested that it was time for her to hear her own written words in her own recognizable voice, a form of feedback to herself. I asked her

to read slowly, taking care to include her list verbatim, “as it was written.” I read to her from my notes referenced to a book that had “gave me courage during a difficult time,” Clarissa Pinkhola Estes’ *Women Who Run With the Wolves*.

We must respond. Yes. To create one must be able to respond. [The effort it takes to]... lift the veils makes one strong enough to tolerate what life it about...Whatever it is we must do to reach the knower of truth in ourselves is our “purification.” Here was another metaphor: the initial steps on the path of courageous speech...are the first tentative steps into the parts of us that cannot speak. Entering their shadowy, previously hidden abodes, we discover an interior energy that has not seen the light of day in a long time.

She read her list in a hushed tentative voice that gained in strength and volume as she continued. What had it been like to read aloud? How was it different from “just writing”? Holly said that hearing the words spoken made them “more final.” She said it was sometimes hard to say out loud what she felt or wanted to say because she was “always worried about a reaction, what other people would think.” These were the “accumulated silences” I had spoken to her about weeks before; this was how it started. Before too long, we forget how to say things we think and feel aloud and we could smother ourselves in silence. “Like in class,” she said. “Because you want people to like you, you don’t want them to think you are weird.” I noted that some of the things on her list were specific and tangible (Chapstick) and others (her mother’s presence at her Confirmation) were more general. As she had discovered, it was hard to predict which associations would be painful and full of emotion when she read aloud. Had she experienced this? As an example, she told me that her mother’s presence at her Confirmation was “more complicated than I thought until I heard myself read it.” They had not been “getting along” during that time, but her mother was happy that day. Yes, this was an image that would be a source of “much reflective material” if we were to work with it further.

Today had been “important,” as she put it; “I heard my own voice speaking to me about me.” I was conscious of the need to re-establish her safe boundaries before she went off to the rest of her day. I asked her to accompany me to the copy room where she could get a drink before she went to class. The walk together served as a bridge; we chatted companionably about the upcoming National Honor Society activities she was in charge of planning.

Serena

Much as she had tried, Serena had not done any writing between sessions. The subject was difficult to approach “without company.” She agreed, however, that this work was “difficult but necessary.” She needed the “prodding” that came from working with someone else in a session; at home by herself, she could “go into avoidance mode.” I noted several questions that directed my own process in this study. Was it possible to approach a difficult issue the way a writer approached the blank page: with a mixture of fear, dread, and expectation? Here were related questions: What did the “work” require of us? What might a line from a poem require of us? Was that therapeutic work? Another form of feedback?

Serena always appreciated questions that underscored the link between the writing process and personal benefits she might realize. They helped to get her “back on track with the process.” The only thing she had been able to do at home was identify another line from the poem “Loophole” she had worked with previously. She told me she had “stayed with” that poem “to see how much it would hold up under this pressure, what it could still tell me.” She had begun to work with a paraphrase of a line; it became “my

stubborn heart.” She had compiled a list of four “traits” that also emerged from the poem and seemed to “go together.” I suggested she begin with her list and write a description that would be an amplification of this image so that I would be able to see what she saw. We were both startled by the result.

My stubborn heart

*Like a screaming five year-old
Lack of control
Stuck
waiting*

It's a little girl, maybe five years old in pigtails. She's always angry, stomps around, slams doors. She screams until she gets her way. She wears a dress, light-colored with a floral pattern and black Mary Janes over white socks. She protests everything. Nothing is good enough for her; she wants the world, all the toys and candy and shiny objects, but she can't have them. So another door slams and she opens it and slams it again. I tell her to stop and she just screams "NO! I want it!" And she never gives up.

After Serena read this piece aloud, I suggested she amplify it further by “looking around” in the image and describing what she was able to see and hear: light, sound, color, temperature. Serena relied on narrative to move around in the image, following the little girl through various rooms.

I follow her as she stomps over a green tile floor past walls of pure white. It's impossible to keep up with her. I reach the opening of a room, dark blue inside, the floor scattered with toys and the white door slams shut. I try the doorknob but it won't budge. I wait a few minutes and the door flies open; she runs past me with heavy footsteps to emphasize her

greedy frustration. She turns a corner into an endless hallway. The slamming of a door echoes in my ears. There is no use trying to stop her, but I turn the corner anyway and keep going.

It was clear to both of us that we needed to know even more about the little girl. I urged Serena to show me more of what she looked like, what she was wearing, including details that would help me “get to know her.”

She is short, like any five year-old. She appears ready for a portrait or a trip to her grandparents' house on Easter. Her dress is short-sleeved and goes down to her knees, all blue and purple flowers shrouding her in innocence. Her black shoes contrast with her light dress, dark but shiny, perfectly polished, as though she had never worn them before. Her brown hair is up in pigtails just above her ears. Anyone who would look at her would expect to see a bright smile on her face, but instead she is always frowning. Whatever it is she is dressed up for, she doesn't want to go.

How did she feel herself responding?

Usually it's frustrating; I can't stop her, can't even keep up with her. I'm so tired from running after her, listening to her high-pitched screams and loud stomping. She just never listens. I have to yield to her demands; I have no choice. I fight her so much, but she always wins. And if I accept it, then she's quiet. Then she's a sweet little girl who will sit still on her bedroom floor and ask me to play Barbies with her. Either she's absolutely nuts or she's the wisest person on the face of the earth.

Once again, Serena noted the patterns in these writings. She felt “trapped” because it felt as if she had “no say” even though she was “well aware” of how she was being “manipulated.”

Holly

Holly had gone to visit colleges with her father over the weekend. She was excited about her Early Decision application and being able to live at home. Her dad had “finally” agreed she could get a cat if she lived at home. I asked her if she thought she and her father needed each other’s company right now; she agreed. They both thought this would be a comfortable way to bridge the transitions that were approaching for both of them in the aftermath of her mother’s death.

It turned out that she and I had a similar thought about the next “appropriate” activity in the process. Even though our time together was ending soon, she could still be connected to this process. What if she used the “title idea” we had been working with as the title of a remembrance project about her mother? Another quote from the Estes book seemed relevant: *At the crucial moment we must know from whom we are descended, where our strength comes from, what kind of blood flows in our veins.* She was excited. The poem could serve as a model; she could assemble a “collection” of images and objects and places and events to write about in order to communicate how she remembered her mother. She would create written pieces and also include “visuals” because “after all, this was about images.” How about “thinking outside the box” this time and allowing the content to suggest the form? Collage, for example, was one-dimensional: perhaps the collection would be a box? She could then include objects that were not one-dimensional as well. She also needed to resist the urge to try to know where she would end up before she started. She mentioned that she could compile this collection with an audience of other teenage girls in mind. Given her ever-present

concern about what “others” thought of her, I suggested that she make every effort to determine whether that audience inhibited or supported her process. I suggested she consider this question (the same one I asked Serena): what do you *need* to say and *to whom*?

She was beginning to recognize examples of synchronicity “everywhere.” I reminded her that this usually happened if she expected what she needed to come to her. In metaphoric terms, she could think of them as signposts that showed her the way on this “right,” purposeful path. I had assumed we would discuss the recent boating accident. Apparently the “chat” on the livejournal site was all about the accident; what were she and her friends thinking about and how were they making sense of what happened? Ever the dutiful student, Holly identified themes in their discussions: the seeming randomness of life, life’s not fair, he was a “good kid and didn’t deserve it,” bad things happen to good people. They were particularly upset because the older brother (a previous student at the high school) had let go of his younger brother’s hand and “now had to feel responsible for the rest of his life, even though everyone knew he wasn’t.” She felt “older” than her friends “these days” because she had had “more hard experience” than many kids her age.

The conversation changed course and became a consideration of ways in which she had changed in the recent months. She recited a litany of ways she helped her friends as a “mother hen”; in what ways was she a good friend to herself? She gave herself “permission” to quit running. It just “got in the way” because having to compete was “stressful.” The expectation of “having to be good put another layer on it.” Then she was trying to be good all the time at everything, always comparing herself to other girls, their

intelligence, their body parts. There was this “never-ending commentary” going on in her head. After that, she found it easier to “allow” herself “more down time.” Late at night, after she finished her homework, she “experimented” with “putting random words together,” certainly more of an associative process that she had entertained in the past.

Would she like to write a last piece about what she had discovered about the writing process and herself in the process? When she read the piece aloud (without prompting from me), she apologized for the “randomness” she had just celebrated moments before. I reminded her that I had not asked her to organize this in a thematic manner.

In this kind of writing, the act of fitting a feeling into word was good for me because it held me there. I could not run away. Before that I just took out my frustrations out on paper in writing, ranting away and never getting anywhere.

I don't have time to write the way I would like...I see that even more now but there's nothing I can do about it. It was hard to write at home, to find a place to start with difficult emotions. When I am writing, my mindset changes. I go off on a tangent and I can't always go back. I also go to painful places, sometimes with no warning and that takes even more time and energy I don't have. Then again, it's hard trying to be perfect all the time.

Writing changes what happened or what I feel; it's different after I write. It's not just mine anymore. Other people reading it (like on livejournal) makes it different too. Words structure what happened; I can get memories and feelings out. But it can also make it worse. If I don't get it exactly right in words, then it's even more depressing.

I have a hard time writing about my personal problems because I am always thinking about who's going to read it. Audience is huge. I don't know how far to go and I am always afraid of judgments. Then again, writing for myself all the time is tedious after awhile. If I think too much, I can't help myself. I just keep going over it in my mind and never go forward.

I learned that I can only read aloud if I am comfortable with whoever is listening. Trust is huge, too. An anonymous group would be good to read aloud in. You would know they could relate, there would be no

judgement [sic]. There would be feedback in what they said, even their body language when they were listening, even if they were totally silent. It's all about that "keeping company" stuff.

By the way, it was so important to not "require" certain tasks or reading out loud at first. Then there is a time when you have to be "forced."

There's a thin line there. I loved the way we followed a direction we could not see.

I've been thinking more about livejournal now. The urge to vent, to get it out is a kind of self-expression and a pressure release. There is a downside; the feedback is a blessing and a curse. It's called a "journal *place*." It doesn't feel like facing a blank page. On the Internet it will always be there. You can save things there, a recording of your life. Of course all the drama that comes afterwards can sometimes be a catalyst. Things come out.

That's what writing does.

Serena

Over the weekend, Serena had gone with Holly and her father to visit colleges.

They took the subway and burned their tongues on hot cocoa. Both of them were excited about the prospect of living at home and commuting to save "a ton of money." Serena talked about her own father for the first time. He wanted to move back to the town both he and her mother were from after she graduated. She had lived in the house I had visited last summer all of her life; this move would be a "huge transition" for her, even as she allowed that the commute would be easier. "Changes are coming that I can't stop." She did not appear apprehensive, however. She was pleased that her father had talked to her about his plans; he "hardly ever" shared what he was thinking with her. This was "big."

Even though she had not done any writing between sessions, she had done "a lot of thinking" about how she might write the piece. To start the process this day, I had her re-read what she had already written about the little girl and mark words and phrases that had "some energy" in them. This time, modeling my own associative process, I suggested she try something different. She might "lift" the highlighted words from the

text and list them on a separate piece of paper. In this way, she would also have a new configuration of words in front of her as well. She read the new collection of words and phrases aloud; we were both intrigued by how they worked together.

She wants the world, all the toys and Candy objects
 She opens it and slams it again
 NO! I want it!
 Walls of pure white
 Greedy frustration
 Slamming of a door echoes in my ears
 She is always frowning
 High-pitched screams and loud stomping
 She always wins
 Sweet little girl
 Absolutely nuts
 Wisest person on the face of the earth

After she read the list aloud, I asked her to attend to her personal connection to this image and “import” aspects of the scene. What was familiar? She might note physical characteristics or perceived similarities in personality traits.

- the color of the walls and floor and doors are like my kitchen and hallway in my house
- the dress is like one I wore in a portrait once
- her hair color is the same as mine
- her room looks like mine when I was little
- she screams and protests and won't stop, just like my feelings

Serena found it “interesting” that while she “clearly borrowed things” from her “real life” in this scene, there were other connections that were “strange,” as if this were a

dream. There was “no question” that she could “see—and hear--herself” in this image. One thought kept coming to her: “even though the little girl gets what she wants, there must be a better way.”

As we walked to the Guidance office to do the copying, she told me that she would be going to her mother’s house for the holiday. Her older sister would be there, home from college. Her dad was going to his girlfriend’s house. Serena would have stayed home with her dad if he were cooking dinner, but she didn’t want to “get involved with another family.” It occurred to me that I knew almost nothing about her mother.

When she arrived for our next session, one of our last, she had done “more thinking about connections” between the scene and the problems she had brought to this process. She wondered about her difficulty talking about her feelings and an image of herself and her father eating on trays in the living room in front of the TV without talking “kept coming back.” She could not talk to her father about her feelings “because he thinks he is always right, just like the little girl.” There was “just so much silence” in their house. Privately, I wondered what her mother would have to say? Serena was beginning to work with her own experience as image.

Due to her increasing facility with the dialogue process, she was eager to begin. She composed a brief introduction and then the dialogue “took over.”

She is sitting cross-legged on the floor of her room, playing quietly. I stand in the doorway, expecting her to start screaming or running around slamming doors but she stays quiet. I actually caught up with her! She’s smiling faintly, amused by her little toys. I walk over to her and kneel down.

S: So you finally calmed down.

Girl: Mmmmm...

S: How come?

Girl: Because you're not being stupid anymore.

S: How was I being stupid?

Girl: Lalalala...you know.

S: Why are you always so angry?

Girl: Because I'm always right and you won't listen!

S: What if you're not right?

Girl: I am.

S: I don't think you are.

Girl: Well then, you're really stupid.

S: But you're just a little girl. You don't know anything about love.

Girl: yes, I do! I know lots! More than you.

S: I doubt it.

Girl: I know you're not supposed to let it go, 'cause that's just dumb. And you're not supposed to fight it either. You should just trust it 'cause it's never wrong.

S: Just like you're never wrong?

Girl: Yup.

S: But love dies. It has to.

Girl: No, it doesn't.

Serena was frustrated, although she “had a feeling” where the dialogue was going. She was beginning to “see and hear” how childish it was to cling to a position “forever and ever as if nothing ever changed in life. Only children do that; it’s time for me to grow up.” Having said that, she acknowledged that “this was easier said than done.” Much as she didn’t like hearing the little girl’s voice saying things she herself said, she also felt “pity” for her. After all, she was stuck. Being “that sure” could be comforting but “you never went anywhere, either.”

Reflexivity Journal

Serena is so closed and always seems reluctant to share details about her personal life. During our discussion today, I remembered how much I felt pulled between my parents, that my mother always spoke negatively about my father, and finally I did not see much of him at all (just what she feared would happen with her own father). I never spoke about my own feelings because home was so chaotic; expressing feelings was a luxury I could not afford.

On the day of our last session, Serena was frustrated with her friends again. They were all preoccupied with the upcoming “Secret Santa” party and wanted her to retrieve a prom picture for a gift. However, the picture was stored in a box of mementos of her relationship with “him” and she didn’t want to open the box until *she* was ready. However, if she attended to the situation *as an image* she “had to laugh” because it was obviously one more in “the pattern” of images directing her to take some sort of action instead of just “clinging to the past.” “At least” she felt as if she had a choice, now.

In “honor” of our last meeting, did I want to read (and hear) how she had “turned pain into art” as a poem? The first line “just came to her” and she “followed the lines after that.”

Apparently I missed the memo
that said we never were.
Everyone else did, they read the bold faced print;
they understood—it never happened.
You believed it most of all.

It must have slipped under my desk,
buried under black cords and dust bunnies.
My heels could have brushed against it,
but I never knew,
so I kept faxing my heart to you.

Everyone filed us away
in locked drawers in dark storage rooms.
You ran us through the shredder,
whistling blissfully.
I refused you with a paper jam.
And when I meet you at the water cooler,
there is no idle chatting; the weather must be dormant.
There’s something cold,
the insensitive coating over your sweet heart
that I remember once was mine.

But no, that part must have been underlined.
He was never hers. She was never his.
We’re changing the font on the cover sheets.
Somehow it never reached me.
I must have taken a sick day.

I’m forgotten in a drone of tapping keys

because all I am, all I ever was to you
 was a mistake.
 So you coated my name in white out
 tarnished our memory, and that was that.

My bright yellow post it note lost its stick,
 so I stopped trying to put it back up.
 The secretary kept me on hold.
 You defeated me.
 Now I'll remain isolated in my dark cubicle.

Donuts. Coffee; waiting forever in my lobby.
 People pass by so slowly.
 And there's just something in your eyes
 I can't shake.
 I looked for you, but you must have asked to switch floors.

In this final poem, Serena was able to reflect on her own conflicted behavior and expectations in the context of the relationship that had come to be significant to her. There was a painful poignancy in the flippant tone the speaker adopted that underscored the contrast between her view of what had transpired and that of her boyfriend (and their acquaintances). There were still echoes of her “stubborn heart” at work in that she acknowledged repeatedly missing signs that the relationship (which she refers to impersonally as “it” in order to establish the increasing emotional distance between them) was foundering. She didn’t catch the “bold print” that might have told her what she needed to know. She alluded to the possibility that “it” might have been misplaced. She even “took a sick day” rather than confront what was happening. Similarly, there were also repeated references to accustomed processes and procedures that were now dysfunctional, further indications of the discord she experienced as everyone around her resumed customary activity, the “drone of tapping keys.” In the final accounting, all of

her attempts to secure his attention were futile: the “post-it note lost its stick,” the secretary put her “on hold,” and he “asked to switch floors.” As the poem closed, even as she persisted and “can’t shake” the relationship just yet, she was, nevertheless, able to attend to perspectives other than her own. The length of the poem and the preponderance of artfully chosen metaphors also indicate her ability to tolerate the ambiguity of feelings that she now acknowledged were not reciprocated.

What kind of feedback was she giving herself when she heard her own voice reading this poem? There were two subjects, as she heard it. She had “all this feeling and nowhere to put it.” It was also about “silence and pretense; everyone just pretending that something never happened so it won’t get uncomfortable.”

Serena had made a decision. She wanted to find a therapist, someone with whom she could “learn to talk.” Without the writing she had done, “especially the dialogues,” which were “practice talking” for her, she would “never, ever in a million years have the guts to do this.” She felt “braver” about hearing the sound of her own voice and even “looked forward” to what it would tell her about herself.

Individual Journeys

I received an email from Holly (because she could not find my phone number) the day after I met with the girls the last time and she wrote her last piece. She had just received her first college acceptance letter. Even though she was going to wait for word from the other schools to which she had applied, she was deliriously happy. As I write this, she continues to email occasionally. She started to “get materials together” for the “remembering project” (as she calls it) over the vacation. She was trying not to put

pressure on herself to finish by “some deadline,” just working on it or “reflecting when I have the time and the feedback and the triggers!” She was going to see her mother’s family for Christmas. When I heard from her later, she said it had been “so wonderful” to see them all in one place, “like a giant remembering ceremony.” The day had been full of happy memories; she felt “free” just thinking about her mother that way.

Serena emails me weekly. Her holiday vacation was “boring as usual” but it had been good to “re-connect” with her mother, who told her she “looked older and wiser.” More feedback! She was going to follow through with her “before New Year’s Resolution” and had gotten a list of therapists from her counselor.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

Based on my own challenging personal experience, I began my doctoral work with an interest in resilience, commonly perceived as a constructive response to life experience. For years, when I wasn't pretending to myself and others that I had emerged unscathed, I struggled to "explain" what had happened to me. Given my academic upbringing and training, with its inherent emphasis on the rational and intellectual, I believed I could identify the "true" version of events, "understand" what had happened to me and, theoretically, "be done with it and move on." As if that understanding would "heal" the negative effects of the experience and release me from the pain. As if ambiguity could be "solved."

I was still searching for the "definitive" explanation when I became ill. In retrospect, this was the beginning of a discernment process that altered the way I "pictured" the world and resulted in a "felt" change in my approach to my life so definitive that I chose to leave my job and undertake doctoral work. I had worked with adolescents throughout my adult life and was all too aware that many of them were struggling, in silence and secret, just as I had. Might I be able to prevent the years of pretense in others? I wanted to learn more about how human beings respond to

challenging life experience. Therefore, given my training and career experience, it seemed appropriate to begin with a consideration of psychological theories of resilience.

In the ten months that I worked with Bree, Serena, and Holly, I came to understand more about how and why they behaved as they did in the face of what researchers call “opportunities for reorganization” that occur in the many biological, psychological, and social transitions during adolescence. I knew from my own experience that the choices they made at these “critical junctures” had the potential to alter the direction of their lives.

Each of them demonstrated a number of the outwardly visible behaviors characteristic of resilience. The challenges they had faced seemed to be “behind” them; they had “moved on.” Their teachers, counselors, friends and parents described them as “survivors.” They appeared “strong,” to have “adapted” and “coped.” They had “recovered quickly” and were “back on track.” They appeared competent, and they were functioning in school; they appeared happy in their social interactions and “well-adjusted.” They had things “under control.” In other words, the problems had been solved. Each described herself as a writer and had used the writing process to “cope” with challenging life experiences. Now, they came to work with me primarily in order to write about their experiences so that other teenage girls might learn from their travails.

While the resilience literature seemed to confirm what everyone observed about the girls, in fact, each of them had been severely challenged in her efforts to respond to ruptures in significant relationships. The challenge of life-altering events was the confrontation with change and ambiguity. As mentioned previously, numerous researchers had emphasized the creativity of the human capacity for *adaptation* (often

described as adjustment and recovery of function) in the face of stress or disruptive change (Werner & Smith, 1992; Stewart et al. 1997).

In fact, it became apparent that the writing process as they had utilized it previously was more often the problem than the solution. Paradoxically, the girls used their writing to impose structure and control on seemingly chaotic and sometimes frightening events and circumstances and, in the process, they imposed limitations on their ability to tolerate ambiguity. In their rush for answers and certainty, they denied themselves the discovery of questioning and the possibilities that arise from multiple perspectives. Certainty was comforting; it also resulted in an immovable state in which they forfeited freedom and choice. They were unable to confront the ambiguity of the ultimate paradox: nothing is certain. Instead, they were left with illusion, pretense born of fear. Paradoxically, if they had been able to abandon the pretense of certainty, they would have had the opportunity to discover. In the struggle to be at ease with unknowing, the universe could be rich with possibility.

Working with words allows for the possibility of reappraisal: of re-visioning and re-naming experience, a creative response to experience. However, that property of words, which DeSalvo (1999) sees that enables them to act as “fixer” (as in photography the chemicals stabilize images even as they offer a new interpretation of experience), was also deeply problematic. Similarly, in my efforts to understand and develop a reflective process of responding to experience, I became increasingly aware of the concept of *coherence* as problematic.

Under close scrutiny, the girls’ attempts to establish coherence were far from therapeutic. Rather, there was a notable discrepancy between the impression of

themselves they attempted to create in their writings and the efficacy of their actual behavior. They rarely approached the blank page without intention, as an experience in confronting its inherent ambiguity. Instead, when they sat down to write, I came to see that each of them had an “agenda” as Bree called it. Their primary intention in writing, in the face of ambiguity, was to establish a fixed, seemingly “coherent” identity and justify the authority of its perspective. Once the particular identity was established, there was little need to entertain other perspectives, any of which might threaten the “coherence” of the one that defended them from the ambiguity of transition and change. As it turned out, even seemingly negative, dysfunctional identities were preferable. Despite occasional acknowledgements of the need for change, Holly and Bree strove mightily to preserve these fictive identities. Serena came to see her identity as the problem rather than the solution and was more receptive to other perspectives (including her own in various guises), the notion of self-as-process.

Each of the girls described herself first and foremost *with* words and *in* words, self as writer. As Holly put it, “I am a user of words...I can twist and contort them into whatever I want.” In the role of writer, she was in control, “powerful, dominating because the pen is mightier than the sword.” The pretense emerged when she “warned” me that she tended to write about her “dark side” in order to “keep happy” in her “real life.” Even when she acknowledged her pretense and the attendant indecision, ambivalence and intolerance of ambiguity in her writing, the pretense was still at work. She continued to use words to convey the impression she was “handling it” and there was “nothing more to be done.” Whatever might have been undecided and ambiguous was “finished,” contained, released.

Similarly, Bree's response to life experience had been accounted for and filtered through the written word as long as she could remember. "I've developed a writing and thinking personality." For Bree, writing "takes the place of crying." She took refuge in the apparent certitude of the written word. "Writing was my thought process...just written down it is easier to trust your thoughts and instincts when they're looking back at you on paper." If it was written, it was unambiguous, absolute, to be trusted. "Anything you choose to write down...feels more permanent and will be nothing short of your own truth. I write...to find the truth."

Serena's pretense was clearly stated. She used her writing to "leave the world behind and go into my own" where she could establish a "different," identity, as long as it was "other." "It can get pretty tough. I can find myself sinking further and further into what I could call a depression. I think that's why I started writing those Gothic things. They were personal and entertaining at the same time; they were dark but just enough removed from me that I could snap out of it."

For the most part I wouldn't use writing to think about and cope with things that were happening to me. Writing was more of an escape. I could write my stories and go to an entirely different world, one that was run by my rules. I could be an entirely different person, different name, different appearance, different thoughts and relationships. I could be a different age or a different gender, or when I was younger, even a different species. I could forget everything in my own life and just create a story that I loved and could keep coming back to whenever I wanted.

Serena did not allow anyone to read her "fantasy stories." When she did share her poetry with selected friends and an occasional teacher, they told me that she was careful

to do what she did with me at first and ingenuously disavow any “direct connection” to the speaker in the poem.

Holly and Bree acknowledged that they used their writing to “think about” what had happened to them. In fact, each of the girls appropriated this “fixative” property of words to sustain the role-playing that afforded them the illusion of control and became their primary defense against ambiguity. They accomplished this in two ways: they either constructed the identity in words or used words to justify the authority of their own perspective and behaviors. Each of them became “different” and maintained an “other” life in her writing, one that remained inviolate, uncompromised by other perspectives. As Bree put it, “Paper can’t judge nor lie but only make you answer to yourself.”

Having established an identity in terms of the primacy of words, each of the girls then continued to use her writing to sustain the illusion of control. Ironically, Bree and Serena wrote about themselves as victims, either powerless to help themselves or with no choice in how to respond. Bree frequently blamed others. “Usually when I’m dealing with something difficult its [sic] because someone is making it difficult for me.” On other occasions, she attributed less admirable behaviors to the influence of others, most often her mother. “I thank her because its [sic] the way I deal with her. She’s made me cynical and critical and above all sarcastic.” In response to the turmoil of her parents’ divorce, Bree struggled to maintain some semblance of control and cast about “to figure out who I am through other people.” As a result, she wrote about herself as “a collection of traits that I maintain because they’re traits I’ve admired in people I’ve come across in my life.’ Her choice of traits was instructive and revealing of her inability to tolerate ambiguity and her need for control.

Bree also used her writing to resist identification with and distance herself from her mother's "crazy schizo" confusion. Instead, she established herself in the impenetrable fortress of authority, finding it "imperitive [sic] especially for girls...to form an opinion for the situation and to educate themselves on it and stand their ground." In her case, however, "educating" did not mean that she considered it worthwhile to entertain perspectives other than her own. Rather, it was a recursive and self-referential process. "When I'm right I know it and under no circumstances do I fold, especially if it's something I feel strongly about." She defined her pretense of clarity as "real" because she "refused to be fake...anything short of myself."

Consequently, by extension, she could borrow and assume authoritative positions and behaviors. In her fixed role as authority figure, she experienced the illusory comfort of certainty, and she was in control. "For as long as I can remember I've always known exactly what I wanted out of any given situation. I've always had a very clear distinction of what I agreed with and disagreed with and I've always known how to get what I want." Endlessly embroiled in the "drama" of her friends' lives, Bree put the "highest priority" on being a "trustworthy" friend, still functioning as an authority figure. "I've always been that person people come to when they don't know how to think or react."

Bree defended her authority on numerous occasions in her writing, with an angry stance, even as she revealed her ambivalence about feelings. "Feelings are just that, things you feel. If you are angry, be angry don't feel bad for the way you feel just feel because its [sic] a hell of a lot better than being numb." On the rare occasion when she did *not* resort to anger, she expressed her dislike for how "extremely tempormental [sic]" she was about "certain things." However, she had found anger to be an effective

avoidance strategy, one that she succeeded in convincing herself was also a solution. “I like how I let myself get angry and then work through it.” Even as she acknowledged that she had “always been one to argue and prove a point” she consistently attempted to portray her anger as a constructive behavior devoid of subterfuge. Her advice to other girls: “be open with the way you feel and give it a voice.” Ensnared in her castle of authority, she became increasingly distanced from her feelings and those around her who might expect her to confront the ambiguity inherent in relationships. “You catch a lot of shit from a lot of people but it can be good because you learn like I did a long time ago not to care what people think and that as long as you are okay with yourself and true to yourself, you’re untouchable.” In fact, Bree was fond of stating that “my parents have nothing to say about my life; they can’t touch me.” Having written about an issue became the justification for not speaking aloud; in her view, the issue had been resolved.

Bree’s increasingly argumentative stance may have afforded her some measure of control over the ambiguity of her situation. However, she experienced significant conflict in her relationships with teachers and her parents, “authority figures” who tried to “impose their will” on her. Everything was a battle. Given her tenacious investment in her own authority, she was inevitably threatened by others she perceived as challenging, and she routinely went on the offense. “I find it entertaining to get a rise out of people. I have an answer for everything and usually an argument that is knowledgeable to back it up.” As she was wont to do in her writing, she cast this problematic behavior in a positive light as “brutally honest” and “real.” In this way she continued to negate the possibility of entertaining other perspectives and refused to acknowledge the pretense. “I am never not myself. I say exactly what is on my mind when it’s on my mind. I’m not

one who puts on an act around certain people, not even people of authority. I am a what you see is what you get type of person.”

On the other hand, Serena came to define herself almost exclusively in terms of others, at one point investing her former boyfriend with “all the power to control what I felt, even about myself.” In this way, she was protected from the challenge of making her own choices and decisions. “He made me feel safe. No matter what else was happening, it didn’t matter, I would be happy as long as I could be with him.” It was a constant, “tiring” struggle in which she “yielded to demands.” At times she identified with her brain. Then, “it wasn’t a choice at all”; it “didn’t matter” what she (and her brain) “thought.” They were the victims of an “out of control” heart that “lies in wait for years and refuses to let go.” At other times, she identified with her out-of-control heart. “I’m in too deep. I want him and there’s no turning back.” The more she distanced herself from her own subjective responses and became increasingly unable to articulate them, the more frustrated she was when “no one asked...and nobody tried to do anything to make me feel better.” However, the theme of powerlessness was fixed in the written word by then. “But my mouth stays shut. And I can’t stop it.”

In her poem, “Loophole,” Serena depicted the ebb and flow of her own indecision. She was “stuck,” immobilized by her dread of ambiguity and change conveyed in the metaphor of trying to use steppingstones to cross a river to the other side. “...all I can do is stare at it and I know I should reach for it...but I’m torn because the shore was safe until it eroded...I can’t choose or try to move.” In her view, there was no solid ground; either way she went, she would suffer. “...to love is to hurt/ but not to love is to be alone/which is worse I can’t decide.” Nevertheless, even as she continued to

attest to her own inability to make a choice, professing to be “ripped in two,” she also entertained the opportunity of forward movement in this poem. Her written words were “steppingstones” as well, not entirely dependable but full of possibility. “I’ll meet myself half way/place one foot on that stone/and tell myself over and over/it’s all I can do/and maybe I’ll believe it.”

The initial steps on the path of courageous speech...are the first tentative steps into the parts of us that cannot speak. Entering their shadowy, previously hidden abodes, we discover an interior energy that has not seen the light of day in a long time.
-Clarissa Pinkhola Estes

Holly used the metaphor of playdoh to characterize how she positioned herself in relation to the ambiguity of mother’s illness and her future as well as how she used words. As Bree and Serena had, she conveyed the impression of being reactive, with little apparent ability to act on her own behalf. “I can be bent and twisted into shapes and statues.” Writing about her behavior in metaphoric terms made it possible for her to capitalize on the suggestive properties of words and remain elusive, even to herself. Even as she protested that she “could never be an actress,” she frequently borrowed identities from movie or book characters in order to “become them and take on their personality.” She consistently used words to “misrepresent” herself. She described herself primarily as “better at being the screenwriter” when in fact, her writing also revealed her to be the consummate actress. Even her experience of the turmoil of emotion was cast in terms of roles she played. “I am a drama [fiction] queen; I’m mad at home, happy around certain people, annoyed with others.” The struggle was on-going: even as she consistently envisioned other roles to play that would serve to distance her from the ambiguity, she acknowledged the “double-edged” fiction she perpetuated. “I

should have been a princess but that would make my mom a queen, which she isn't." She responded to the change in her mother and her own confusion and anger by casting them both in new roles. "I'm not a lovable, affectionate girl anymore and she's not my mom." On another occasion she wanted to "translate" herself in order to "grow up and be Spanish." Eventually, however, the curtain came down and the lights came up. "But you can't change your heritage. No matter what you'll always be...in my case...a mistake...the only child who has a mix of parents."

However, the screenwriting went on; there were always other theaters, other stages, new audiences. She had joined the track team when she entered high school. She became well-known as "a runner," yet another metaphor by which she defined herself and represented herself to others. Holly was never at rest, never comfortable with herself, always setting the bar higher, moving faster and faster. "I'm a runner. An athlete. I've found that most runners are a lot like me-we all push ourselves and try as hard as we can." Runners take refuge in the apparent certainty of numbers. Similarly, her identity as a runner also served to protect her from the ambiguity inherent in relationships. "The majority of us are individualistic. I think that's why I like to run-you have actual numbers to tell you how much you've improved and you don't need to depend on anyone else. How I run is up to me and me alone. I don't have to worry about anyone but myself." If she were not required to entertain other perspectives, she could maintain the illusion of resolution, and the world was a less ambiguous places. "I'm trying to get over everything and move on but everyone else keeps pulling me back."

Holly was able to acknowledge the "misrepresentation" that was at work in the roles she played; she depicted it in terms of the star metaphor. In this excerpt from one of

her poems, she acknowledges her fragility in the vulnerability of being that visible, prone to burn out after a fire blazed too bright.

I am a star.

Always burning, shining, even when people don't see.

Too hot to touch, to get close to.

Made up of millions of little things burning and fizzing and exploding.

Not completely understood.

Used as an image of success, like a gold star on top of a paper in first grade or some sport's star of the season.

Misrepresented.

Each of the girls had afforded herself a measure of illusory certainty and control in the “different, other” roles she composed, played, and/or perpetuated in writing. Additionally, their inability to tolerate the ambiguity of the multiple perspectives inherent in relationships with others became the hallmark of yet another role they shared. Given that the inevitable result of their withdrawal was isolation and solitude, they began to write about themselves in “individualistic” terms as Holly had. They were loners, a role which once again offered the illusory comfort of their self-referential perspective even as it precluded any possibility of relationship...or help. Bree described the process by which she became “untouchable” in her writing. “I was [so] consumed with anger and sadness that I didn’t respond at all. [There was] A point where I figured silence would be more effective. I used to sit in my room racking [sic] my brain of what I could’ve said and then the possible outcomes. However, I found that in certain circumstances, many of them involving my mother, silence is much more effective. Almost like I found a way to manipulate the situation where she didn’t know what to do or say to me.”

Over time, the role became a habit. As Serena said, “I’ve gotten used to dealing with things on my own. Now I tend to kind of crawl into myself when things are

difficult. I don't let anyone help, even if I want them to, even if they make a serious effort at helping." Increasingly, she wrote about her solitude in fatalistic terms, once again abdicating the power to prevent or reverse it. "I see myself alone...I was meant to be alone. In reality there is no one but myself." She expected to be alone and believed in being prepared. "Being able to cope with things on your own would be important in case there's a time where you really don't have anyone to rely on." In her view, she "let" the "dark shadow" of her self-imposed silence "engulf" her; her voice "coming out" only when she was alone...or in her writing. "Nobody knows a lot of things about me, what goes on inside my head." In time, she was "too numb," once again describing herself as powerless to help herself or ask for help; her isolation was complete. "Every day it kills me./ And I can't stop it./ I've always been wrong,/ Thinking I could escape it, /Because I never will." Serena acknowledged the potential benefits of "opening up," even as she perceived herself unable to do it. "I think it's more important, and I don't have this trait, to be able to open up to people and let them help. People who are close to you really do want to help when things are hard, but I've never been able to really see that." Consequently, the only plea for help she could muster was a (silent) prayer. "I've just been leaning against a glass wall my whole life,/Just praying that somebody would crack it." Each of the girls had been overwhelmed by the inherent ambiguity of relationships. As a result they were unwilling to surrender the illusion of control they gained by constructing a world in writing in which they were responsible for and answered only to themselves.

Each of the girls also attempted to distract herself with an "obsessive" and never-ending pursuit of what Bree termed "the perfect response whenever something crucial

happened.” They were never at peace. As long as they were able to envision the possibility of perfection, control was possible. In a perfect world, nothing was ambiguous. Describing themselves as “OCD,” their writings revealed the stark details of feverish efforts to garner some measure of elusive control.

Having described herself in writing as “the type of person who likes to know exactly what is going on,” Bree was “not one for surprises.” Consequently, at the first hint of “positive or negative effect,” she turned to writing because she saw it as “absolutely necessary to have it all down on paper.” Bree remembered that childhood night she was playing Tetris while her mother caught her “off guard” and threw her brother’s clothes out in the rain. She vowed it would not happen again and concluded that she needed to “work backwards, analyze and interpret situations, and get the details any way possible.” She could do this in her writing. Therefore, Bree wrote tirelessly to “have it documented” so as not to “miss something” that might only be revealed to her if she “researched the details without stopping.” There was a comforting, if illusory structure in having “a record of what happened” that enabled her to “feel stronger.” She was the only one of the girls to keep an extensive written account of her senior year, the primary function of which was “to record every little thing that was said or done” in order to have her “smallest thoughts documented and restored.” Once again, she relied on the written words to afford her some semblance of integrity in the face of ambiguity.

In her writing, Holly revealed the numerous ways in which her “obsessive” behavior served to ensnare her in the relentless pursuit of an ideal of perfection she could not define. Nothing was clear, and the effort would provide endless distraction from the ambiguity of her future. She claimed to “know” that “there is no perfection, never has

there been and never will there be” and that she was not “looking for perfection” even as she allowed that “the perfectionist in me is ever-present and will never leave.” However, she was unwilling to relinquish her pursuit of perfection, even as she acknowledged her confusion. “I don’t even know what I’m looking for but I can’t just let things go, not finish something I’ve started.” She cast this choice in terms of defeat. “Giving up shows weakness, a characteristic which I’ve banned.” In this way, she had used the written word to lay the trap for herself. In her effort to rid the world of ambiguity, everything that was not a win was a loss. She could not rest. “I hate being wrong. I hate that feeling of failure and disappointment. I hate knowing I could have done better. I need to excel at everything. I don’t settle for anything less than the best. I like being better...” It was a precarious existence. “But I keep reaching and stretching my limits...and I hope that I don’t stretch too far and break.” Even her mother’s illness and incapacity was, in her view, a reflection on herself. “I started hating her. I couldn’t deal with her, or with having a sick mom. It was an imperfection, a blemish.”

Once again invoking the dichotomy between heart and head in which she conveyed a sense of herself as powerless, Serena described herself as “obsessive beyond all reason.” As her relationship with her boyfriend changed, she attempted to resolve the discomfort of the ensuing ambiguity by “choosing to cling to” the relationship as her “only lifeline” to the “good feelings this relationship gave me that I never had before.” She could not envision the future without him; instead, she chose to “dwell” on the problem and “just let it eat away” at her. “One tiny thing could happen and I’d mull over it for a week.” She would not allow herself a “reason” to feel sad, instead punishing herself for being “depressed for no reason.” It was a vicious cycle. In the written

dialogue with her boyfriend, she assumed the relationship ended because she was “obviously never good enough.” Despite his protestations, she could not envision being loved. “It’s like I had to be perfect or you wouldn’t be able to accept me.” Nevertheless, the narrow ideal of perfection held her attention. “Sometimes I completely hate myself. I hate who I am, how I act, what I look like. I hate how one tiny thing can go wrong and I’ll be depressed for the whole day. I hate how I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” The only perspective she would entertain was her own.

In their continuing struggle to tolerate the ambiguity of their circumstances, all three girls acknowledged what Holly characterized metaphorically as the “pressure release” they derived from “the urge to vent” in writing about what had happened to them. In her typical rush to “move on,” Holly was drawn to express emotion in free verse poetry that imposed no “format...restrictions or specific guidelines” on her writing so that it would be “easier to get everything out right away, just go.” Similarly, all three girls acknowledged that the lack of “rules” on the Livejournal website afforded them opportunities to “rant and relieve some feelings.” Their priority was to use the writing process to “get it out into something permanent” which they experienced as relief, “a break down of mental blocks,” albeit temporary. As Bree put it, “Writing doesn’t make [problems] go away...but I feel different after I write.” She experienced a “calming, soothing effect...almost like a drug” from the physical act of writing. “I love it when I get in the rhythm of it, like when I am really upset and the words just pour out.”

Serena also subscribed to the notion that she could gain relief from “dwelling” by “not keeping it bottled up but getting it down on paper and ...out there.” Even more problematic than the temporary relief they perceived, however, was the illusion of

“release” derived from this kind of “venting” in writing. Each of the girls sought to convince herself that difficult emotions needed no further attention. Therefore, as they continued to perpetuate the illusion of the primacy of their own perspective, it was not necessary to invite or attend to additional perspectives.

After I had been working with the girls for several months, I was increasingly aware of this tendency to use the writing process in a number of ways to resist the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Holly and Bree sought to establish the illusion of resolution or closure, while Serena struck a “hopeless” note in her inability and unwillingness to ask for help.

Following the most recent confrontation with her mother, Bree wrote a revealing piece about the “aftermath” in which she responded to “a finale of hardship and emotional breakdowns” by “finding the cause and removing it...no matter the consequence.” She had arrived at the conclusion to sever all communication with her mother. Describing the process as “the setting in of hatred like concrete slabbed over my heart but lifted off my mind,” closure was underway, initially in the dark in silence. She acknowledged the depth of her pain in her silent screams and tears, still determined to take refuge from the chaos in the finality she affirmed in the written word.

After I left her that night I kept screaming to myself “why do I continue to let her do this to me? Why do I for some reason think things will be different?” I made a pact with myself @ that very moment that I would never let her in again. It was a very upsetting moment for me because I had officially made the jump. I had gone all of my teenage years without a mother basically but this was the last straw and there would be no going back. It was the first time in a long time I had cried so strongly.

Notably, she characterized her continued hope for a relationship with her mother as a “breakdown.” Rather than be “caught off guard again,” she resorted to anger, the

only audible voice she would allow herself to articulate the pain of her disappointment. It was a voice she continued to describe as “honest.” More importantly, it offered the illusion of control as she established an all-or-nothing authority to “never back down” in the “pact” she made with herself to “revoke her right as a mother.”

I unleashed on her. But it was exactly what I needed. I learned the definition of separation that night. She will never be a part of me again. She will never be given the opportunity to upset me like she did because she is no longer a part of me...Fury has never run so cold within me and it will forever remain that way. No apology will make a difference. Simple words like I'm sorry and I love you can't even begin to touch my hate for this woman. All my negative energy is held behind her name forever remain that way.

It was a voice that did not tolerate ambiguity and was unwilling to allow the benefit of other perspectives. The rigidity of the single perspective was evident in the entrenched patterns emerging in her verbal pronouncements. “I won’t talk about my feelings. I am afraid of being upset, I don’t like being upset, and I can’t control my feelings. There is a very fine line between when I get upset and when I say ‘get the fuck away from me.’”

Presumably freed from the demands of “fancy words and inspiring prose or poetry,” Holly wrote a lengthy piece after the death of her mother in which she claimed there was “no point in trying to pretend.” She was careful to characterize her writing as devoid of “dramatization” or pretense, just as Bree had. In her writing, Holly expressed her ambivalence even as she evoked her inability to tolerate the ambiguity of her mother’s illness. “I don’t want to talk about her, but my best memories are of when I was younger. I’m glad she left when she did...I feel no guilt now. Well, I feel a little guilty.” She acknowledged that she found “the blemish...the imperfection” of her mother’s

illness “extremely hard to deal with,” a trade-off being the only resolution of the discomfort of ambiguity from her perspective. “Sometimes I do think of her, but mainly I am thankful I don’t have to deal with how she was. I’m glad there will be no more fights or getting ice or guilt trips...It sucks having her gone but I’d rather have this that the way things were a few months ago. But sometimes I wish there was someone here in the morning with me so I wasn’t alone.”

In terms reminiscent of the playdoh metaphor she had used to describe her own “way with words,” she saw her mother’s death as “some twisted sort of closure and release...one less thing to worry about.” She qualified the visible and audible expression of her grief in tears as “only” a response to the shock of being the one to find her mother “with a thin blue line where her lips met, which proved to me that she was really dead.” In perhaps the most telling excerpt, she also seemed to find it necessary to offer an explanation, as if to justify her tears as unique to this particular situation, all the while minimizing the emotional impact. The wording was convoluted and evasive. “I cried, of course. But I [and here she crossed out the word “think”] was crying for reasons that escape most people. I wasn’t crying because I would miss my mom. I cried because the death was a statement saying I would never have the chance to have a mom again.”

Now that the “weight” of ambiguity had been “lifted off,” she could create the somewhat dispassionate impression in her writing that feelings were no longer necessary. “The death was some kind of resolution...and after that I felt no guilt towards her, nor anger, sorrow or anything. I had no literal mother now, but it didn’t affect me too much because I hadn’t seen my real mother (the woman she used to be) in years.” As she had on previous occasions, Holly emphasized her self-reliance and resisted efforts to

encourage her to attend to other perspectives if they appeared to prolong the ambiguity. “I don’t really want to think about our relationship anymore because...I know I can care for myself...that’s all I have to say about it.” She continued to minimize the potentially negative impact of such a loss, claiming that, as a result of her mother’s illness and death, she was “not as emotionally unstable, not paper thin.” Rather, she chose to cast it as a “positive effect” that “I break down less easily...it takes more to crack or break me...instead of being like an egg, I’m like a coconut.”

Each of the girls had felt the burden of what Wallace Stevens called “the pressure of reality,” significant personal turmoil which continued intermittently during their participation in the study. Prior to her work with me (and as mentioned previously), Serena had addressed personal issues indirectly in her poetry in which a deliberately elusive speaker spoke in “abstractions” that “didn’t get right to the point so I didn’t really have to confront [them].” Holly and Bree had written about personal issues; however, despite an occasional acknowledgement of ambivalence, they steadfastly maintained the pretense of resolution.

Given the invitation to consider “significant things from the past” more directly, Serena agreed in her writing that her experiences had made her “stronger.” However, her definition of the word “stronger” differed in its apparent willingness to recognize the necessity of change and personal responsibility. “When something bad happens, I learn from it and realize how I can do better in the future.” Serena was also able to acknowledge that the effect of these experiences was potentially negative and warned against the potential pitfalls of adopting a habitual self-reliant posture in the face of turmoil and ambiguity. “But then again, a lot of bad things have just made me insecure

and caused even worse things to happen. All the bad things that have happened in the past and the way people have treated me have always made me feel alone and that I couldn't rely on anyone but myself. But this kind of thinking only made things worse."

In contrast to Bree and Holly, Serena did not summarily reject other perspectives. Rather, she seemed to welcome them, even as she was unable to verbalize her desire for input and feedback and often expected others to read her mind, particularly during a crisis. "I am stuck in a glass case while everyone in my life just walks by. I don't really know what I'm feeling, which people are truly my friends, what I'm supposed to do with my life." It was a vicious circle in which she struggled to change in the face of long-standing behaviors. "Because I was so used to feeling that way, I could never open up with my boyfriend and that was one of the major things that screwed everything up. So I know that I need to open up to people but since this has happened it just makes me want to shut them out even more."

Writing about the need to invite alternative perspectives did not immediately make it possible to do so. She was motivated, however. "I know something is there, it has to be. But I can't feel it. I want to be able to figure out what I'm feeling and why I'm feeling it, and to try to make myself better for it." Even though she spoke of her urge to "get rid of it" and hasten resolution as the others had, she was determined to attend to causality. "It seems like there have been events in my life that have been significant, but I haven't realized that they are. I want to see what flaws I have and how they have been caused by events in my life, but also how they have created certain events."

Serena's relationship with her boyfriend was short-lived and ended shortly after she began working with me. They both "mostly failed" to articulate their thoughts and

feelings, and she was initially “desperate for answers.” However, Serena had allowed herself the benefit of another perspective she had come to trust in those few weeks and continued to have a strong sense of his support. Their albeit ineffective attempts at dialogue made a strong impression on her. He had been the first one to “call her on” her silence and “endless guessing games.” There was no denying the validity of his points; she noted ruefully that “he should know; it takes one to know one.” He had made it clear that he didn’t want to be the one to “fix” her; she did not want to be perceived as “broken” any longer. Most importantly, she had come to the realization that if she continued to choose to remain silent, she would probably remain alone. Conversely, if she were to enter into another relationship, she would need a voice and she would need to acknowledge other perspectives.

Despite her initial reluctance to read aloud, which I attributed in part to Holly’s presence in our first sessions, Serena embraced the opportunity for dialogue and feedback inherent in the Intensive Journal process. In the process of attending to the “feeding back of the experience of her own existence,” she had arrived at several instructive conclusions. Each crisis she had endured was an opportunity to test the perspective she (and the other girls) had previously adopted and vigorously upheld in their writing when confronted with ambiguity: There is no one to help. I am alone. I can take care of myself. In the course of the dialogues she composed in which she “talked in writing,” she “began to hear from the other voices” that this “strategy” wasn’t working. Despite her efforts to avoid the discomfort of ambiguity, the ensuing solitude and silence was becoming almost intolerable. Even more significant was her dawning realization that change was possible,

and it was her responsibility. The verb statements she wrote about her own choices gave her invaluable feedback, another perspective.

If I had chosen not to bottle up my emotions, a lot of things might have been different. I wouldn't be so shy; I wouldn't be depressed all the time. My boyfriend and I would still be together. I've never been an open person, and if I had been, maybe people would understand me more. Maybe they would take me seriously. Maybe I wouldn't feel like everyone always walks all over me. Maybe I'd be a lot happier.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Wallas (1954) described the first stage of the creative process as preparation, “a period of disturbance and casting about,” a restlessness or compelling and unsettling discomfort.

As mentioned previously, each of the girls came to her work with me heavily burdened by what Wallace Stevens (1942) called “the pressure of reality,” although they strove mightily at times to dispel this impression, even to themselves. So much depended upon perspective. Those pivotal moments that resilience researchers referred to as “opportunities for re-organization” Stevens also perceived as “...a set of events not only beyond our power to tranquilize them in the mind, beyond our power to reduce and metamorphose them but events that stir the emotions...to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (p. 20).

The second stage that Wallas (1954) called incubation corresponds to the inertia of the nigredo in alchemy, that time of heaviness, waiting, and surrender also characteristic of serious illness or the immobilization that results from the initial shock of challenging events. This stage of the process calls for immersion in the soggy inertia of ambiguity, seemingly fraught with peril for all who attempt it.

Despite outward appearances to the contrary, each of them was still fragile and vulnerable. Having been encouraged on numerous occasions by well-meaning teachers, family and friends to “write it all out,” they had come to believe, as Holly put it, that “writing was all there was to it, all I needed to do to deal with it.” Serena had been told “if I didn’t get that craziness onto paper then it might stay in my head and I could end up

in a strait jacket.” In their view, writing was valued as a process culminating in a product, a piece of writing that represented release, “the end” of the process.

Understandably, this orientation imposed severe limitations on their ability to embrace and “trust” the ambiguity of the process as opportunity for discovery. Similarly, each of them was reluctant to entertain opportunities for exchange and feedback, having adopted the posture that “asking for help was a sign of weakness,” as Bree put it. She “reserved the right to pick and choose” who read her work, and was not above using her writing to inflict pain on others. She “almost always” read her poems to her mother (when they were still on speaking terms) because “she taught me how to write and she used to love my poetry, and now I can make her cry.” Holly continued to affirm her “split life” in her writing as she consigned the ‘dark side’ to her poetry “in order to keep happy in my real life” while Serena took refuge in her fantasy stories and “abstract” poetry.

In the face of additional “shocks” as Virginia Woolf called those “*blows from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life*,” I observed each of the girls adopt Woolf’s perspective on her own writing practice. “*I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole and this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me*” (as quoted in Greene, 1995, p. 72). In this way, the girls believed, as Woolf did, that writing released them from “non-being,” the inability to understand what had happened to them. Each of the girls, as did Woolf, used her writing to give recognizable shape to the events in the hope that it might suggest decisions about their significance and how to respond to them. In this way, they expected to re-gain their equilibrium.

However, when the “shocks” came, as they did to each of the girls during the course of the study, their previous writing practice left them ill-equipped to tolerate the inevitable ambiguity. Intent on “going it alone” and “being done with it” in their writing, they foundered. Following her boyfriend’s sudden announcement that he was ending their relationship, what Serena made “real” in her writing had even more power to harm her: affirmations of her own lost voice. On more than one occasion, Bree was so intent on not being “caught off-guard” that she lashed out at everyone near her, including me, thereby erecting a wall of words that served to isolate her from much of the assistance and advice she needed most. Holly just made sure that her words kept her running. The girls were writing and writing, all alone as they had for years. Unaccustomed to a response, they habitually devised effective strategies to ward off or disarm potentially threatening challenge to their perspectives.

During the illumination or albedo stage, the “whitening” process enables what Gadamer termed a “break with antecedents,” an interval that affords “the possibility of total renewal, the capacity to see everything with fresh eyes” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 17).

Finally, it was about relationships after all. Initially, opportunities to read aloud or engage in dialogue, which carried with them the unspoken expectation of asking for and receiving a response to their words, were fraught with peril. In the process, they would need to consider their relationships to present or potential audiences. Holly was the most reluctant to read aloud in the sessions, finding the sound of her own voice “foreign” because she was “always worried about a reaction...you want people to like you...you don’t want them to think you are weird.” Serena had difficulty writing about personal problems because she was “always thinking about who’s going to read it. I don’t know

how far to go and I am always afraid of judgments.” Even Bree, who was eager to read aloud and professed to be unconcerned about the opinions of others, was furious when the sound of her own voice made her weep, sometimes uncontrollably, in front of me. She would “rather die than cry in front of someone because then it will be all over.” All three girls acknowledged that the livejournal website was “insanely popular” because they could write to the “unseen, sometimes anonymous” audience. Feedback was “implied” because they “just know” someone was reading their words. However, if someone did respond, it was “usually not helpful because they just say what everyone else says, nothing that makes a difference.” As Serena put it, “so much depends on who asks and who is listening.”

The period of verification that follows requires the heat of the rubedo, a creative as well as therapeutic process, “the distillation that grows from a trust in the intelligence of the creative process and a desire for relationships with the images that emerge from it” (McNiff, 1992). This effort is supported by an attitude characteristic of Bildung, “keeping oneself open to what is ‘other’” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 17).

What kind of feedback *did* make a difference? I found it instructive to review instances in which the girls attended to other perspectives as evidenced in observable or reported changes in their own perspective and behavior. As Louise DeSalvo (1999) asked: *What is healing but a change in perspective?*

In fact, all three girls affirmed the significance of reading aloud, what Holly called “the huge risk of hearing your own voice.” She did everything she could to postpone that moment of reckoning. Rather than read her words in their entirety, she doodled and drew diagrams, she summarized and paraphrased, and she talked and talked *about* her writing. When Holly finally did take the risk, the change in her affect was

noticeable. Her voice dropped to a whisper and she adopted an almost child-like singsong tone. However, albeit slowly, her voice gained in strength and volume.

On the other hand, Bree was eager to read aloud, at first. For months, every time Bree heard her own voice reading what she had written, she was struck by what was fed back to her, and she wept. At times, it was the undeniable discrepancy between the “false” impression of herself she worked tirelessly to create and the “truth” of her own feelings. She could “hardly bear” to see what was reflected back to her in those tears, because she was “so sure” that she would be “judged for the weakness of them.” In time, when her boyfriend and I did not abandon her when she cried in front of us, she began to see that she was her own harshest critic.

Serena was “usually excited” about reading her “abstract” poems aloud. She did not perceive it as a risk because “they didn’t get right to the point and I didn’t have to confront it.” However, reading aloud became increasingly challenging as she read “more personal” pieces. “It’s hard to deal with those feelings and I had to face them twice, first writing them and then reading out loud. And hearing it makes it more real, which sometimes is hard to deal with.” Despite her discomfort, Serena never hesitated in her affirmation of the value of reading aloud. “I learned that it’s not always easy to say something out loud but it really does feel better to be able to do it. I would recommend it because it’s helpful to have somebody react to it, much better than bottling everything up and having it eat away at you.” In fact, all three girls acknowledged the value of the consistent expectation that they would read aloud in every session. Each of them credited the feedback she received from the sound of her own voice as the impetus behind her ability to take significant steps. As Bree put it, “I would never have had the guts to argue

with Tommy and not just let him have it and walk away unless I had practice crying and then waiting.” Serena concluded that if she could read “personal stuff” out loud, she might be able to talk out loud with a therapist. Holly was still unwilling to “go public”; however, she perceived a connection between the feedback she received from her “out loud voice” and the messages her body gave her when it grew tired of running for her. “Right now I sound like a baby; I have a baby voice. I think I want to grow up.”

The girls were also entranced by “the power of metaphor to point to unspoken things,” as Holly put it. “And they never judge; they just do their work and leave it to you to do yours...or not.” I had given her the example of the centering process on the potter’s wheel. In picturing the potter at work, she was “amazed that it is not about total control at all...that wobbling is the way it’s supposed to be.” Similarly, she was pleased with her increasing capacity to “learn not just academic but personal things” from the metaphors she encountered in her poetry assignments. In Crane’s poem about the “weeds like knives” which she saw as “particular sharp-edged things that have happened,” she reported that she “felt her thoughts just letting go, unraveling, like a ball of yarn” as she considered the word “knife” and the related associations of “cutting.” On numerous occasions during our work together she affirmed the value of “very unusual” opportunities to “trust the process,” which “sometimes was about following and sometimes about listening.” In our discussion of the metaphor of the mirror and its ability to reflect, as images from experiences might, we also had the opportunity to consider the “reflection” she had received as feedback from her own body on the day she quit her race. She perceived its refusal to keep running in metaphoric terms. Not only had she attended to her body’s perspective *that* day, she had stopped running

competitively altogether because she was “sick of running like that through my life; you can’t hear when you are running.”

Serena had a similar perspective on metaphors. “Sometimes I just sit back and let them tell me what I was going to say.” Her writing about the “spoiled brat” she took to be a metaphor for her “stubborn heart” enabled her to “stop glorifying my unwillingness to let him go.” By way of the metaphor, she recognized the conjunction between the image of the little girl and her own perspective and vowed to “give it up.” The most significant development resulting from this work was her decision to find a therapist and “learn to talk out loud like someone I would respect.”

Given my objective of developing a capacity for reflection, I kept the metaphor of the mirror in front of us throughout our work together. Bree was forever weaving a tangled web of statements that often contradicted themselves. The first time I held that mirror up to one those statements, she experienced what James Joyce called an “epiphany of the ordinary.” Early in the process, she had written about her belief that few people revealed what they were thinking or feeling; consequently, she took pride in “how little it takes for me to write people off; nothing is taken at face value.” Later in the process, when I asked her to define certain words she had used to describe herself, she defined “honesty” in metaphoric terms as a “photograph...a still frame...at face value...just the honest truth.” Given that she struggled with her inability to trust, she and I both held the mirror up to that phrase “face value” on many occasions after that.

Bree used another metaphor to justify her marijuana use; she liked living “on the edge.” However, the mirror revealed that she “smoked weed to take the edge off”; in fact, she became distinctly uncomfortable when her mother “pushed her to the edge.”

Near the end of our time together, Bree told me “that mirror never let me get away with anything.”

All three girls reported that the process of writing the “verb statements” referenced to the Steppingstones of their lives generated feedback that Serena termed “heavy but not scary because they sounded like poetry.” Bree was intrigued by what the verbs “told” her about “the effect of these experiences on me, more than I ever knew before.” In fact, although Holly did not read aloud in our sessions for months, she was able to read the verb statements. It was a particularly important exercise for Holly, who was usually reluctant to return to anything she had written and re-read it, thereby depriving herself of an opportunity for feedback and a fresh perspective on her words. She acknowledged that re-reading the Steppingstones list and the necessity of choosing a particular verb to “condense” what had happened in those moments helped her to “learn what it was about.” Perhaps given her predilection for not remaining in one place for long, she responded positively to the “summary” form. Once again, she described her response in metaphoric terms. She knew she “did not have to stay there,” rather she could “wade in without plunging into the deep end.” Similarly, Serena felt an affinity for the process, likening it to “putting these things in their places all at once.” She reported being “deeply affected” by the process of composing and reading the verb statements aloud because she was able, for the first time, to feel “sympathy” for herself because “so much had happened.”

My primary objective in this study was to gain a greater understanding of the way in which the writing process might reveal or facilitate the capacity to attend to multiple perspectives, including a new approach to the ambiguity of challenging life experiences.

Furthermore, I theorized that this capacity was dependent upon the girls' ability to engage in various forms of dialogue, including those dependent on an audible voice that expected and received a response, thereby making possible the benefit of other perspectives. I utilized the *Intensive Journal* method because I hoped it would afford the girls a framework for written dialogue that might be helpful as they attended to other opportunities for exchange and feedback with images. If the mirror was the metaphor of the reflective process before us, I continually characterized the *relationship* with all of the mirrors we faced as a dialogue.

Not surprisingly, I have concluded that the girls' approach to the dialogue exercises was the most revealing aspect of the process. Depending on how their dialogue work progressed, I was able to make some assessment of their present and future ability to consider perspectives other than their own, in their personal life as well as in their writing. I began to see connections between how they had previously written about their experiences and the issues they encountered as they attempted the dialogue work itself. I was also intrigued by additional connections the girls made between the dialogues they composed in writing and other kinds of dialogue they were able to attempt.

For example, Bree rebuffed every invitation I extended to engage in a written dialogue with persons or images. She never wrote one. She told me repeatedly that there was "no one worth talking to" and she found it "impossible to imagine getting inside someone else's head." Instead, she generated numerous images from two pivotal moments in her life and felt it was "critical to tell the story over and over again." Despite her hope that "someone might finally hear them," her narratives were one-sided, with no opportunity for exchange. However, she finally took a "huge risk" with Tommy, her

boyfriend, and at my suggestion, wrote him a letter in which “I kinda did one of those dialogue things even though I was the only one talking.” She claimed she had written it with no expectation of giving it to him, and he “found” it and read it. It was a profoundly significant moment in their relationship. “After that, we talked. He said something and I said something and we got mad and it was OK. I cried and I didn’t leave and he didn’t leave.” In this way, her writing served as the bridge that enabled them to cross back and forth to each other. Similarly, in the spirit of facilitating exchange and additional opportunities for feedback, I also encouraged Bree to engage in “whatever kind of dialogue” she could manage with the tears she shed. She was not yet ready to use the writing process to do that. However, she could still “hear” from them and “receive messages.” Bree arrived at the tentative conclusion that, much as she previously “despised crying as the first sign of weakness,” she could perhaps, trust what her body was trying to tell her. “Here I am, hell-bent on the truth, and it might be right in front of me.” In both instances Bree had made progress toward including other perspectives in her on-going efforts to confront the ambiguity inherent in her challenging relationships with her parents and her boyfriend.

Holly came to a similar conclusion. In the time we worked together, she only composed one written dialogue, in which she attempted to confront her friend Jocelyn about her destructive behavior. At first, she professed to find it “somewhat fake because I would never do that; I don’t like confrontation.” When I suggested that this reaction might be feeding back the most beneficial outcome of the dialogue process, in that it supported her attempt to try something she hadn’t done before and didn’t think she could do, she also saw that she received important feedback about the significance of her fear of

confrontation. However, as Bree had, Holly remained reluctant to use her writing for the purpose of dialogue. Nevertheless, she continued to recognize opportunities for feedback from “other kinds of dialogue” in which she could “practice and rehearse how to say hard things out loud.” In fact, her growing interest in the value of soliciting and attending to feedback was borne out most clearly in our discussions of the Jungian concept of *synchronicity* which she saw as dependent on the metaphor of “signs” as the vehicle for feedback. I continually reminded her that she had to develop an “expectant perspective” in order to recognize the signs when they presented themselves. Holly seemed to benefit from these discussions that were “less academic and more open-ended than I am used to.” Initially characterized as a “game,” her practice of “watching for signs” seemed to support a developing habit of attentiveness to feedback and an openness to other perspectives she had previously been unable to sustain.

Of the three, only Serena embraced opportunities for dialogue in writing in order to attend to perspectives other than her own. Unlike Holly and Bree, she had already received feedback she was willing to trust. Her boyfriend had told her that the “basket case scenario” she had established previously in her writing to characterize herself was, from his perspective, “the beginning of the end” of their relationship. Therefore, she was motivated to change. Determined to “dig myself out of the hole the same way I dug myself in,” Serena set out to change the way she used her writing to confront the ambiguity of the situation, “when things get scary.” She began her work with me willing to use her writing to “take another look” at herself and the relationship.

Serena’s dialogue work enabled her to identify and attend to varied perspectives that seemed to support an increasing capacity for reflection. Perhaps encouraged by my

own shared experience with the dialogues as an opportunity to dispel “otherness” and “make the strange familiar even as we make the familiar strange,” she began to view words as images themselves that “could reflect back things I might need to hear.” Similarly, in reading aloud her writing about imaginal scenes, she heard feedback in the voices as “translations” of the “unmistakable truth” of certain aspects of her experience that “might not necessarily be what I want to hear” but which was, nevertheless, a “wiseness” she could not ignore. From the dialogues, Serena also received what she characterized as “invisible but real support,” beneficial affirmation of her continuing struggle to come to terms with the ambiguity inherent in loss.

On more than one occasion, Serena recognized herself (or references to herself) in the dialogues, and these conjunctions seemed particularly significant. In her dialogue with the snow, for example, she heard the snow “open to being open while still feeling stuck.” Previously, she had not thought it possible to maintain more than one perspective at a time. Now she “heard” that she could still suffer but also must “do something different sooner or later.” The feedback she received from this dialogue was different from her friends’ constant admonitions to “get over it.” Instead, “coming from inside,” she experienced it as “comforting evidence” that she had “not closed down completely.” By the end of our time together, Serena had engaged in written dialogues with people, objects, atmospheric elements, metaphoric representations, and even “shades of gray.” The dialogues became conversations and, even more “unfamiliar,” hers was not always the initiating voice. She began to perceive “patterns showing up” in the feedback. In fact, she credited these “repeated messages” as one of the “forces” behind her decision to

enter therapy. "All I kept hearing was 'things are the way they are' and that I can't just cling to the same position as if nothing ever changes."

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

We must respond. Yes. To create one must be able to respond. Lift[ing] the veils makes one strong enough to tolerate what life it about...Whatever it is we must do to reach the knower of truth in ourselves is our 'purification.' The initial steps on the path of courageous speech...are the first tentative steps into the parts of us that cannot speak. Entering their shadowy, previously hidden abodes, we discover an interior energy that has not seen the light of day in a long time.

-Clarissa Pinkhola Estes (1992)

How to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered?

-Jerome Bruner (1990)

Things come out.
That's what writing does.

-Holly

As stated previously, my primary objective in undertaking this study was to determine whether participation in an imaginal writing process might reveal or facilitate the development of what I came to call a reflective sensibility. In particular, I focused on the girls' present and potential capacity to attend to multiple perspectives as it might support an increased tolerance of the ambiguity inherent in challenging life experience.

I had always remembered my own profoundly rewarding personal experience with the *Intensive Journal* process and had, over the years, tried to envision varied applications of the process in the context of my work with adolescents in a school setting,

only to be frustrated by time and space constraints. Now, I have finally been able to realize a significant personal and professional goal. As the foundation for the method I developed to support the objectives of this study, the process did not disappoint. Just as I had hoped, the girls' participation in the process afforded them numerous opportunities for new and unique experiences that transpired at the interface between creative and therapeutic processes. Most importantly, they reported 'felt change' as a result of this work, just as I had remembered it happened for me.

In the spirit of Expressive Therapies, with its emphasis on interdependent and co-existing creative processes, I also felt it was important to engage in my own writing process. To that end, I participated in a poetry seminar for eighteen months during the time I developed and conducted this study. Another happy accident: I became a member of a core group of women from diverse backgrounds who kept each other company in an effort to focus on "aspects of female voice" in poetry. It was agonizing work at times, this probing of past experience, uniquely female silence, and the effort it took to bring it to voice. It was necessary to manage the delicate balance of our commingled creative work, support of individual process, and a firm affirmation of the value of aesthetic demands in the service of clarity and realization of one's subject.

As a result, I have come to see the reflective sensibility represented in unique patterns of choices guided by the capacity for reflection and an openness to multiple perspectives. It is a process I liken to the writer's response to the blank page, an attempt to confront the unknown as opportunity rather than limitation. Significantly, it is not an effort to impose structure on seemingly chaotic experiences with a primary objective of "making sense" of that which is unfamiliar. Rather, the reflective process is fluid, a

recursive exchange with circumstance, environment, and other people. The foundations of the reflective sensibility are an intermodal tapestry of perception and interaction.

In the spirit of such reflection, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study in an effort to envision extensions of my research. Perhaps most importantly, the girls and I were burdened by the time and space constraints inherent in the conventional school schedule every time we met. Our fifty-minute class periods were marked by opening and closing “bells,” which mitigated against the establishment of an atmosphere conducive to the creative process and usually caused jarring interruption to the process instead. The girls had grown accustomed to this fragmentation after years of schooling; nevertheless, it became particularly problematic when a task invited them to engage in a necessarily unpredictable associative process. The objectives of this study emphasized language as the creative medium. Nevertheless, I am still curious about how writing might be used in conjunction with other non-verbal Expressive Therapies to work with images that arise from life experience. Despite the girls’ repeated appreciation of the opportunity to work with me during their school day (and their unanimous insistence that more than occasional meetings at an alternative site or at another time would have been problematic), it remains to be seen how the process might have been different if we had more appropriate space and additional materials.

When I originally conceptualized the research design for this study, I hoped that the girls would be able to return to the written work they had done and undertake further re-vision of their writing. I still believe that such an effort would enhance the therapeutic benefit of the creative process. The results of their work with the verb statements, which required them to return to specific experiences and distill their import in a limited number

of carefully chosen words, foreshadowed the potential benefit of revision. In fact, each of the girls asked for time during her last few meetings with me to review what she had written during the months we worked together. It became obvious that this reconsideration of the significance of particular words and phrases referenced to their experience enabled them to formulate additional alternative interpretations of what happened. Consequently, there exists the potential for developing other courses of action in response to that experience.

In order to extend the implications of this study, I am also curious about what might transpire if I used an imaginal writing process to work with younger individuals or adults. Additionally, I might work with individuals who had no prior experience with writing about personal challenges. In such cases, it would be informative to address the significance of varying degrees of facility with writing and manifestations of reluctance or resistance in the context of relevant psychosocial and developmental issues.

The outcome of any writing process must be recognized as a function of the relationship between the writer and her actual or perceived audience, and this relationship must be openly acknowledged and continually evaluated. Therefore, I must affirm the necessity of guided intervention. Even as individuals continue to affirm the (albeit temporary) benefits of writing done in solitude and silence (and which the girls and I can attest to), I am increasingly concerned about the potentially deleterious effects of this practice if not combined with other writing practice that expects—and receives—a considered response. After all, in the parlance of the study, the capacity to expect and attend to feedback from *other* perspectives is the hallmark of a *reflective sensibility*.

During the course of this study, it became readily apparent that the ways in which the girls conceived of and were in relationship with numerous audiences was profoundly significant given they were working with a process entirely dependent upon such relationships. More than twenty years ago Gilligan (1982) concluded that girls, given their proclivity to favor connection and relationship, were at risk in a society that rewarded self-reliance. Today, I have concluded that the young women I worked with are still vulnerable in this way. Caught in an age-old bind, the girls were, at all times, intensely mindful of how their words, written or spoken aloud, might “play” to an audience, even as they sought to create the illusion of “going it alone.” Every act of writing occurred in the context of past, present or potential relationships. In response to the significant disruption of key relationships in their lives, each of them initially used the writing process to create problematic distance and separation. Unsure of what “public voice” might potentially compromise relationships they valued, they told others what they wanted to hear or said nothing at all about their own thoughts and feelings. As each of them told me, they were finally unable to put troublesome thoughts and feelings into words and became increasingly unable to “sense” them at all. The cruelest irony: in the absence of an expectation of being heard and a response, they were, at least initially, rewarded for their efforts. Therefore, I continually encouraged the girls to distinguish between what Bree called “just marks on paper to get stuff out” from writing that expected feedback, a response.

Although I am aware of students who seem to derive some benefit from writing about personal experience as it is routinely assigned (and responded to) in school classrooms, I am more concerned than ever about the potentially negative consequences

of this practice (and the difficulty of making this determination). Much needs to be done to qualify the still prevalent notion that writing, particularly that with the sole objective of “venting,” or expressing emotion, is therapeutic *in and of itself*. Instead, the value of writing in the context of a therapeutic relationship characterized by mutual rapport, trust, and clearly established boundaries cannot be overstated. Having said that, today’s students are in dire need of opportunities to participate in creative processes if they are to develop a *reflective sensibility*, and creative writing offerings figure prominently among them in that they afford students opportunities to explore and work with the properties of words. Additionally, the presence of school counselors trained in Expressive Therapies would support this objective.

At times, the most appropriate and beneficial response is the recognition that words are “slippery,” as Bree put it. This determination is derived from a complex network of factors, including the purpose for which they were used, how they were perceived, and properties of the words themselves. The girls discovered over time that words have the potential to mislead in potentially destructive ways. For this reason, Holly concluded that “writers need company from time to time... [because] the writing process makes you go so deep and there is the possibility of getting it wrong, blaming yourself.” She also characterized “company” as assistance and support. In her view, shared by the others, writers need help “breaking things down first to get to the point where you can write about really hard things.”

Individuals who undertake an imaginal writing process with the expectation of therapeutic benefit would be well-served by an audience (i.e. counselor or therapist) who adopted what Siegelman (1990) termed a “symbolic attitude” that doesn’t regard “what

happened” as mere fact but rather an expression of something unknown that might be full of meaning. Such an approach capitalizes on “the linking or transcending power of symbolic connection” (p. 166) that, in this study, made itself known primarily in the girls’ work with metaphor and their consideration of metaphoric correspondences. In this context, two questions become relevant: “What larger meaning is at work here? What else is this besides what it appears to be?” Siegelman referenced the example of a tortoise that suddenly appeared beside a pond. The tortoise could be viewed as a “mysterious gift” and its “very essence its mysteriousness, its ‘otherness, its refusal to be known” (p. 162-3). Such experiences are opportunities for learning that, in Bruner’s view (1986, 1990), occurs via those moments of creative insight or “transgression” of the orderly categories of expectation by which the writer formerly organized her perspective. In Bruner’s theory, the objective, via the writing process is to enter into that which is as yet Other, unknown and mysterious. In the process the writer recovers something of the face-to-face character of oral discourse within the written word and enters the “transgressive possibilities” that interweave themselves among the inherent limitations of words. In this therapeutic context, it would also be important to afford individuals many and varied opportunities for what Knill et al (1995) termed ‘intermodal transfer.’

Poetry therapy is an example of another guided intervention that supports the development of a capacity for reflection. In this context, I offer an adaptation of Levine’s (2000) theory of the topology of awareness I found particularly instructive. Subscribing to the notion that applications of dialectical logic are inherent in the therapeutic use of metaphor, poetry therapists explore the metaphoric properties of words (as they are revealed in poetry) in order to reveal relationships among multiple perspectives. In this

context, the isomorphic nature of experience is appreciated through a process in which entities having different interpretations are held in tension and are recognized as being in relation with each other. As a result, false dichotomies are suspended and replaced by an awareness that the division into opposing poles characteristic of Aristotelian logic misrepresents the nature of experience. This process results in the synthesis of opposing terms or entities in a *gestalt*, a wider whole that encompasses each individually and contains them all collectively. Levine (2000) contends that *gestalt* may be understood as similar to Langer's (1953) "power of comprehending form," an awareness that occurs at the incipient phase of human life and remains a significant mode of cognition throughout life. Such an awareness of the *gestalt* nature of an individual's experience leads to a dialectical relationship with world.

In this way, a *reflective sensibility* may come to be understood as a network of protective factors in support of resilience. As such, it is an approach to challenging life experience, rather than an idealized behavior or outcome, dependent on a capacity for reflection. In this context, reflection is a dynamic process characterized by a number of practices associated with creativity (such as the willingness to approach ambiguity as opportunity and attend to multiple perspectives) that would itself engender a changed perspective.

Of particular relevance to this study is the notion that resilience is an interactive phenomenon, the product of the complex relationship of inner strengths and outer help through a person's life span...the outward and visible sign of a web of relationships and experiences (Butler, 1997, p. 26). According to Walsh (1998), resilience is "woven in a web of relationships and experiences over the course of a life lived from birth through

death.” (p. 12), and must be understood as involving systemic, mutually reciprocal processes derived from increasingly complex relationships.

Additionally, I am gratified by researchers growing interest in promoting resilience as an innate human capacity to transform and change despite challenge and adversity (Benard, 1997; Lifton, 1993). Resilience may also be understood as the *individual variation* in the way people respond to risk. Rutter (1987) asserts that resilience cannot be seen as a fixed attribute of an individual; if circumstances change, resilience does as well. As a result of my work with the girls, I have come to appreciate resilience as a dynamic process, a function of what researchers conclude is the on-going interplay of their unique strengths, capacities, vulnerabilities and ‘goodness of fit’ with the demands and opportunities of the environment (Felsman & Vaillant, 1987, p. 289). Similarly, Rigsby (1994) sees resilience emerging from the interaction of personality, social context, and opportunities for or demands on the person (p. 89)

The study of the way(s) in which human beings make particular and unique meaning of their experience requires entry into the liminal world of paradox. The very efforts an individual makes to impose structure and control on seemingly chaotic and therefore sometimes frightening events and circumstances are those that blind her to the need for connection with deep sources of strength and creativity. In the rush for answers and certainty, she can forget the exhilaration of questioning and the possibilities that arise from multiple perspectives. Certainty seems comforting; it is also an immovable state in which she forfeits freedom and choice. The ultimate paradox: nothing is certain. All else is illusion, pretense born of fear. Paradoxically, when an individual abandons all pretense of certainty, she has the opportunity to look deep. In the struggle to be at ease with

unknowing, the universe is rich with possibility. Every movement of experience in completing itself recurs to its beginning, since it is a satisfaction of the prompting initial need. The recurrence brings change; it is charged with all the differences the journey out and away from the beginning has made (Dewey, 1934, p. 168).

All writers approach the blank page with fear and trepidation, perennially insecure and unsure of their ability to transform ambiguity into creative opportunity. In fact, the **reflective** response to challenging experience is similar to the writer's response to the blank page. It eschews certainty and is instead an inward movement in opposite directions: the paradoxical experience of fear with hope. It is a movement that affirms the human need for order while remaining flexible. It is what Richards (1962) and Lifton (1976, 1993) call the creative effort of centering, the fusing of opposites. Its primary objective is balance. It is a generative force that continually heals what appear to be separations by making them fruitful. Survival is not the only objective; instead one learns to see life and death and change as the outward appearance of inner transformation (Richards, 1962). The geometric form of the lemniscate or moebius strip is a physical representation of the reflective response, a continual turning inward and outward. It is a continual engagement with experience, not a withdrawal from it. It begins with pain and ends with paradox (Richards, 1962). As Wallace Stevens (1942) said "it is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. If it is enough to bring about theend of one era in the history of the imagination, then [it is] great enough to bring about the beginning of another" (p. 22-36).

In the passing of one to another:

Moments, days, whole times of life, there is certainty and that which beckons to an unknowing. Each has both—needs both—thrives on the exchange—can never cease exchanging. This, too. As the darkness of unknowing encroaches, a slow dread curls around the edges of familiarity; what won't be known in loud of light is evening's recompense. Human imperative: to resist: venturing forth the only promise that of the journey itself, darkening shadows' deeper thrust, the world at once surmising. Hardly a consolation for the loss: of promises never broken, a crackling fire, cup of hot tea. Forsake all that for the voyage out? Comforts may be few, the journey perilous. Why go? I seek to be changed.

-Cameron Marzelli
January 2006

APPENDIX A

DISSERTATION STUDY: CONSENT FORM AND SUMMARY

For questions about the study, contact:**Cameron Marzelli, M.Ed, CAGS, RTC**

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Summary

You are invited to participate in a research study that investigates the way(s) in which narrative and creative writing supports the development of resilience in teenage girls. You will be asked to meet privately (or in a small group on a voluntary basis) with the researcher and write creatively from various prompts about life experiences (of your own choosing) and share what you have written with the researcher. You will also be interviewed by the researcher about your particular writing process and your response to specific writing tasks. You will be asked to read aloud from your writing on a voluntary basis. The researcher would like your permission to audiotape record all writing and interview sessions if it is deemed necessary. All of the audio and written material gathered from our sessions will be analyzed and compiled in a dissertation as required in the Dissertation Phase of the researcher's doctoral study at Lesley University. Copies of the dissertation will be disseminated to the members of the researcher's Dissertation Advisory Committee. Members include: Julia Byers, Ed.D., Division Director of Expressive Therapies, Lesley University; Steven Cramer, MFA, Director of the MFA in Creative Writing at Lesley University; and John Woodall M.D. of the Harvard University School of Medicine.

Risks and Benefits

The risks associated with this study are minor and should be temporary if they occur at all. They may include heightened emotionality and sensitivity as a result of reflecting in writing on personal experience. The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study include any or all of the following: increased flexibility in the face of uncertainty and change, increased willingness to consider multiple points of view, increased awareness of the relationship between choices and consequences, strengthening of personal identity, improved decision-making, increased clarity of written expression. In addition, your participation in this study may help me and others better understand how to help teenage girls discover valuable inner strengths they may use to deal with personal difficulties.

Time Involvement

Your participation in this dissertation study will require approximately 10-15 summer and school-based sessions with the researcher, each session lasting approximately 60-120 minutes depending on available time, from February-December

2005. Additional commitment to writing outside of session time is desirable for maximum benefit but not required. Additional research sessions may be scheduled (if necessary and convenient to the participant).

Subject's Rights

If you and your parent/guardian have read this form and you have decided to participate with his/her consent, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw consent or discontinue your participation at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. Your individual privacy and confidentiality will be strictly maintained in all published and written data and oral reports resulting from this study (except in the case of implied or direct statements of physical or mental harm whereupon the researcher is mandated to report such concerns to the appropriate school personnel pursuant to Massachusetts State Law). After this study is finished, all materials related to the study will be destroyed

I, _____ and _____ give
Participant Parent/Guardian
consent to participate in this research study according to the terms stated above.

I, _____ and _____ give
Participant Parent/Guardian
consent to be audiotaped during this study.

Date _____

Consent: Site Administrator

I, _____, principal or designee of [name of high school]
(print name)

[street address] have reviewed the terms of participant consent outlined above and do hereby approve use of the above-mentioned site as necessary for the duration of this study.

Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

Interview with Bree

In the past, what have you usually done when facing challenging life experiences?

I used to think I had OCD because whenever something crucial happened I always wanted the perfect response. When my mother told me she was moving us [to a new house], I was [so] consumed with anger and sadness that I didn't respond at all. A point where I figured silence would be more effective. I used to sit in my room racking [sic] my brain of what I could've said and then the possible outcomes. However, I found that in certain circumstances many of them involving my mother silence is much more effective. Almost like I found a way to manipulate the situation where she didn't know what to do or say to me. I used to sit in my room racking [sic] my brain of what I could've said and then the possible outcomes. However, I found that in certain circumstances many of them involving my mother silence is much more effective. Almost like I found a way to manipulate the situation where she didn't know what to do or say to me.

How do you think the challenges you have faced have affected you? Positively?

Negatively?

Ever since I was younger I've always wanted to be older. I think it has to do a lot with the way I was raised. My mother has never treated me like her daughter to her I think she's always seen me as a friend. I was doing what most teenagers don't learn to do at the age of 8. I thank her though because my maturity soared once I became a certain age and my perspective and insight is sharper than most girls my age. I've also developed a writing and thinking personality. I'm a cynic and a critic and I'm okay with that because it's true to myself I'm truthful no matter how mean and that's how I like it. I don't see the point to living any other way however I'm accepting of others [sic] lifestyles and for that I thank her she made me become who I am @ an extremely early age but at least I'll never have an identity crisis. I thank her because its [sic] the way I deal with her. She's made me cynical and critical and above all sarcastic. If I took everything she said and did to heart I'd be an extremely depressed person.

What personality traits do you think would be helpful when facing challenging life experience? Why?

Sense of humor: Personally when dealing with something that is out of the ordinary whether it be positive or negative it is imperative [sic] that I use my sense of humor especially when the situation is negative. In every situation there is humor. You only

live once so it doesn't make sense to me to stay angry or sad all the time when you can find simplicity and humor even at your darkest moments.

What five (5) words would you use to describe yourself at this time in your life? Explain the meaning of the words you have chosen as you understand them in reference to yourself.

- 1) *OPINIONATED*
- 2) *TRUSTWORTHY*
- 3) *BRUTALLY HONEST*
- 4) *REAL*
- 5) *FREE*

- 1) *In the sense that I have an answer for everything and usually an argument [sic] that is knowledgable [sic] to back it up. I find it entertaining to get a rise out of people and to make them form their own opinions from arguing with me.*
- 2) *I have always liked to look @ myself as a good friend. I've always been that person people come to when they don't know what to think or how to react.*
- 3) *I say exactly what is on my mind when its [sic] on my mind. However I have excellent tact. Whether I decide to be tactful however varies.*
- 4) *I say real because I am never not myself. I am not one who puts on an act around certain people, not even people of authority. I am a what you see is what you get type of person.*
- 5) *Free in the sense that I've freed my mind to all different types of people and lifestyles. Not that I don't judge them but to figure out who I am through other people breaking no boundaries but setting them through experience and having them be my own.*

Have you used the writing process in the past to deal with challenging life experience? If so, in what ways?

Ways I've used writing to deal w/ personal issues

- Poetry*
- Letters to my dad*
- drawing/scribbling*
- diaries/journals-always hand written [sic]*

- AIM [AOL on-line instant messaging] conversations, negative and positive
- non-thinking writing
- question/answer journal writing
- rambling on the computer just to get everything out
- blogs for the public then private written journals
- writing then throwing out or setting on fire (getting rid of my thoughts)
- songs
- writing for other people or about other people
- better writing when I'm upset
- books where I write quotes from funny things or have other people write to keep record (like weed journal)

What goals do you have as a result of your participation in this project?

There are two main reasons why I wanted to work on this project. One is to put myself out there and help other girls the way I have not been helped myself. Also, It's always been very important to me for some reason to keep record. I think this is important to me because I have had good times and bad times and if I have all of it recorded I can go back during the bad times and remember that life goes on and it's the little things that make it all worthwhile remembering and holding on to. Now that I think about it, it will be good to hear what another person thinks about what I have written. Not only the style of it which is what school does, but the heart of it.

What can you tell me about how writing your answers to interview questions before talking about them (and reading your answers aloud) might have made a difference in the way you answered the questions? What about the significance of the form you chose to use to write your answers?

Theres [sic] this kind of pause after you finish the question where I can think about what I want to write, like an excuse for not talking right away. It's O'K in writing to stop from time to time and think where it would be weird if we were talking. I think I put more detail into the answer if I am writing it out. Maybe that's not always true. I think for some questions like the one I did the list for where writing the answer is much better. I never would've [sic] come up with that list if I were just talking about it. Its [sic] like one thing lead [sic] to another on the list and I just followed them. I would loose [sic] my train of thought if I were not putting it on paper. But all this writing has to have talk too.

What do you see yourself doing in five/ten years? How would you describe your attitude toward the future?

Recently for some reason I think there is going to be a time where there is a fork in my "life path" if you will. A decision between a life of family and typical suburbia and a life of self-fulfilment [sic] and my work life. Both prosperous in many ways. However I have vowed to myself many times that I would give up my career to be a good mom because the last thing I want is to be anything like my mother. Family I can see in my future being either my whole world or non-existent [sic] there's no inbetween [sic]. @ 22 however I plan to be someplace away from here ideally [sic] California where I can be with people more like myself. I plan to write all over the world and see many things that will draw inspiration. I've always known that marriage will be a time-consuming process for me because I'm so deathly scared of getting divorced that id [sic] rather be alone from the start but now that I have experienced the unity of a semi-serious relationship my views are shifting. Its [sic] a comforting feeling to be taken care of but I don't trust it because my past reminds me of how quickly things can be taken away and how far you'll [sic] be left behind. @ 22 I hope to be independent and carefree spending most of my time figuring out who I am and who I aspire to be as a person of new beginnings [sic] and opportunity because ill [sic] be a point in my life where restriction is scarce.

APPENDIX C

Interview with Holly

In the past, what have you usually done when facing challenging life experiences?

- *Yell—when angry—at parents (even if it wasn't really their fault)*
- *Throw stuff (pillows, ball) at my door*
- *Eat*
- *Write*
- *Go online and talk to people*
- *Talk to people normally (by mouth)*
- *Complain*
- *Journal (written and livejournal)*
- *Scribble on stuff*
- *Cry*
- *Take a shower*
- *Stay in my room*
- *Watch TV or a movie*
- *Rip something or crumble it*
- *Listen to music (esp. Evanescence)*
- *Lay on the floor (either while doing nothing or watching TV)*
- *Bite the end of a pen/chew something*

*How do you think the challenges you have faced have affected you? Positively?
Negatively?*

- *Made me stronger—I break down less easily (positive)*
- *Less trusting towards people (both)*
- *Self-doubt (negative)*
- *Worry more (positive and negative)*
- *Care less about certain people and things (negative)*
- *Focus more on self (positive and negative)*
- *Stronger: takes more to crack me or break me...instead of being an egg, I'm like a coconut. I've stopped worrying so much about what other people think, and focus more on improving myself for me. I'm less vulnerable to pain and sadness because of things. I'm not as emotionally unstable, and I'm not paper thin.*

What personality traits do you think would be helpful when facing challenging life experience? Why?

- *Flexibility*
- *Resilience*
- *Nonviolence*

- *Some kind of outlet (creative, athletic or otherwise)*
- *Ability to think about things and be able to blame someone else (or yourself, depending)*
- *Being able to look at things from another perspective*
- *Keeping friends or others you can talk to—just know they're there helps*
- *Learn from everything*

What five (5) words would you use to describe yourself at this time in your life? Explain the meaning of the words you have chosen as you understand them in reference to yourself.

Resilience: the ability to not be completely (100%) devastated by something, and the ability to bounce back and become stronger/more stable after something has happened.

Flexibility: being able to look at things differently, take other things into consideration, and look at the situation from other points of view. Also being able to do something (like go out for ice cream or watch a movie) after something has happened & not just wallowing in self-pity & complaining and whining.

Have you used the writing process in the past to deal with challenging life experience? If so, in what ways?

Poetry helps me express emotions because there is no format. There aren't any restrictions or specific guidelines to follow. You can just go. And it's short, so it's easier to get everything that you're feeling out right away so you don't forget anything or lose any words. And poems help make me feel better, once I've gotten what I wanted to say on paper or onto the computer. Livejournal and regular journals help because, once again, no format or rules. With regular journals, you can say what you want. And with livejournal, you can get sympathy and advice. All my friends who have one say it helps them to rant and stuff. There are negative to writing, too. Not being able to get what you want to say come out exactly right is very frustrating. And sometimes writing in a journal makes you even more emotional. With LJ [livejournal], you may not get feedback. Or you may be feedback you don't want.

What goals do you have as a result of your participation in this project?

Not complaining so much. No, screw that. Complaining helps; people hear it. Writing more, stop stressing so much about things, finding more

"me"/relaxation time, being more sympathetic to others & try to understand what they're going through.

What do you see yourself doing in five/ten years? How would you describe your attitude toward your future?

I am anxious about the future, also hopeful and scared. I have expectations...there will be disappointments. Hopefully, by that time I'll be out of undergrad and going into or have already left grad school, with a successful solid career under my belt and a better understanding of the world. I'll be happy and possibly rich. But most likely I'll be slightly stressed.

What can you tell me about how writing your answers to interview questions before talking about them (and reading your answers aloud) might have made a difference in the way you answered the questions? What about the significance of the form you chose to use to write your answers (e.g. lists, paragraphs).

You can take more time to think & you can answer more thoroughly. Trying to explain something out loud without writing it first is hard because you can't say what you want to. You have to think more, which creates more silence, which can be awkward. And there are less "um's" and Uh's" and "like's." The negative mostly has to do with not writing enough; you might stop before you're finished, or trying to write as fast as you're thinking. Also grammar, rules, etc. The form I used just seemed to fit what the question asked; some of them sounded like a list would come next.

APPENDIX D

Interview with Serena

In the past, what have you usually done when facing challenging life experiences?

I tend to kind of crawl into myself when things are difficult. I don't let anyone help, even if I want them to, even if they make a serious effort at helping. I've gotten so used to dealing with things on my own. I usually dwell on the problem and just let it eat away at me, and it only makes things worse. The only positive thing I do is write, whether it's a poem to get my emotions out, a story to escape to another world, or just a livejournal entry vaguely stating how I feel that I know no one will respond to. But it's still there. I am able to get those emotions out somehow.

How do you think the challenges you have faced have affected you? Positively? Negatively?

The only positive thing that has resulted from these events is that it makes me stronger. When something bad happens, I learn from it and realize how I can do better in the future. But then again, a lot of bad things have just made me insecure and cause even worse things to happen. All the bad things that have happened in the past and the way people have treated me have always made me feel alone and that I couldn't rely on anyone but myself. But this kind of thinking only made things worse. Because I was so used to feeling that way. I could never open up with my boyfriend and that was one of the major things that screwed everything up. So I know that I need to open up to people but since this has happened it just makes me want to shut them out even more.

What personality traits do you think would be helpful when facing challenging life experience? Why?

Being able to cope with things on your own would be important in case there's a time where you really don't have anyone to rely on, which is one trait I do have. But I think it's more important, and I don't have this trait, to be able to open up to people and let them help. People who are close to you really do want to help when things are hard, but I've never been able to really see that.

What five (5) words would you use to describe yourself at this time in your life? Explain the meaning of the words you have chosen as you understand them in reference to yourself.

- Stuck—I don't really know what I'm feeling, whether I'm in love or not, which people are truly my friends, what I'm supposed to do with my life, whether I'm angry, or happy, or depressed.
- Focused—school work is becoming more important. I want to get good grades and work hard to get into college.
- Open—I'm trying to be more open with people, not just expressing myself but trying to get out of the house every once in awhile.
- Tired—not just lack of sleep, I'm tired of the way I've been feeling the past few months and I just want to get rid of it.
- Trying—I guess I'd like to be friends with my ex-boyfriend again, despite these feelings that I know I have, and I know he wants to, but it's still hard for me. But I still want to try because I'd rather be friends than to end up hating him.

Have you used the writing process in the past to deal with challenging life experience? If so, in what ways?

For the most part I wouldn't use writing to think about and cope with things that were happening to me. Writing was more of an escape. I could write my stories and go to an entirely different world, one that was run by my rules. I could be an entirely different person, different name, different appearance, different thoughts and relationships. I could be a different age or a different gender, or when I was younger, even a different species. I could forget everything in my own life and just create a story that I loved and could keep coming back to whenever I wanted.

What goals do you have as a result of your participation in this project?

I want to be able to find myself. I want to see what flaws I have and how they have been caused by events in my life, but also how they have created certain events. I want to be able to open up, even if it's just through writing, because I've never really been able to and now it's something that I realize I have to do.

What do you see yourself doing in five/ten years? How would you describe your attitude toward your future?

I'm rather pessimistic about the future. I'm optimistic about my career, though. I see myself as a successful novelist, wearing black horn-rimmed glasses sliding across the hardwood floor of my office in a computer chair while writing my second novel. But I see myself alone. I'll call a few friends every once in awhile, but in reality there is no one but myself.

What can you tell me about how writing your answers to interview questions before talking about them (and reading your answers aloud) might have made a difference in the way you answered the questions? What about the significance of the form you chose to use to write your answers (e.g. lists, paragraphs).

I think writing things down first has made me think more deeply on things before I say them. It makes me dig more for what I'm trying to say. If I was just saying things, I would probably say a few sentences or say something like "uh...I don't know." But since it's going down on paper first, I really have to think about it. Since there's evidence of my thoughts, I don't just want them to be blank and boring. I want there to be some depth to it. Reading out loud helps because I'm not just keeping everything to myself. I'm actually telling someone else and getting a reaction and maybe even some help for what I was or am going through.

APPENDIX E

Task and Guiding Questions
(with thanks to Steven Cramer, MFA)

This task is designed to invite entry into an imaginal world and encourage imaginative associations. In this way, the imaginal process functions as a bridge between the subjective and objective “worlds,” thereby facilitating access to intuitive non-verbal (subjective) experience of actual events. At this stage, participants are discouraged from conventional (objective) considerations of form so as not to preclude and in order to emphasize opportunities for (subjective) creativity in the imaginal process.

The opportunity to return to the writing with the intent to delve deeper into subjective experience as text is an integral part of this recursive writing-as-inquiry process. Words and phrases are “mined” for the most meaningful associations, and suggestive images come more sharply into view. Considerations of temporal “reality,” voice, space, and perspective play out in this process, the result of creative “writerly” choices that represent the ineffable aspects of experience. This is the beginning of the “fixing” phase.

1. *What is the light like in this scene? Start with darkness and imagine where the light began.*
2. *Is there action in this scene? Start with complete stillness and imagine where the motion began. This can be a subtle action or a larger one.*
3. *Bring color into this scene. Can you use any colors in relation to physical objects or emotions?*
4. *Is there sound in this scene? Let the audience hear it (perhaps as metaphor).*
5. *Can you see anything looking out from this scene? If so, show the audience what you see.*
6. *If there are other people in this scene, what are they saying to each other or to you? Dialogue is a form of concrete detail; would a few pieces of dialogue make the relationship more vivid?*

APPENDIX F

Imaginal Task Directions

(with thanks to Steven Cramer, MFA)

Bring your attention to a particular moment or period of time in your life that you feel was particularly difficult or challenging for you. This might be an event, a situation, and/or a relationship that you believe has made a significant difference in the way your life has turned out so far. The object of this exercise is to offer you the opportunity to revisit a difficult experience in your life by way of a writing process that will encourage you to explore your thoughts and feelings about this experience in an imaginative way. Your attention to this experience will serve as the “trigger” for your imaginal process.

With this experience in mind, create an imaginal scene in your writing that evokes the atmosphere and the emotional significance of your actual experience. Take your time to embody the surroundings of this setting with objects, each of which creates concrete, physical images in the mind of your audience. Try to avoid using “real” objects unless they occur to you persistently or are embodied with particular significance. Let the images convey to your audience the emotional significance of that experience. If it occurs to you to include people (or animals) in your scene, they should not be those actually involved but rather imaginary creations, endowed with characteristics that represent your impressions and/or feelings about the experience. Imagine yourself “casting” this scene with actors and actresses who would most accurately represent the characteristics you are attempting to convey to your audience.

While you will start with a particular experience in mind, it is important that you follow your imaginary process wherever it leads you. Begin by free-writing, letting associations come to you while trying to remain as concrete as possible. Don’t worry right now about form (lines, stanzas, punctuation, etc). Concentrate on strong verbs and nouns. Whenever you use an adjective or an adverb, try recasting that phrase as an

image (e.g. “the air in the room was hot and humid” becomes “the air steamed like the inside of a tent in summer.”)

When you have finished writing, go back over what you have written and circle the freshest images. Does one of them suggest a good first line? Remain open to your imaginal process, adding new sensory details or movement and gestures if they occur to you. Who is the speaker in the piece? Is there more than one? When did this take place? Will you use past, present, or future tense (or some combination)?

Keeping in mind what you want to convey to your audience, begin to consider the form you think will be most appropriate. Think about lines and line breaks, stanzas, and/or paragraphs (remembering that words placed at the ends of lines and the beginning of lines receive special emphasis). Think about how your writing should be placed on the page and how the spaces around your words might also be used to contribute to the meaning you are trying to convey. Be sure to number and date successive drafts of this piece.

APPENDIX G

Interview Questions

The following questions are designed to solicit information regarding subjective characterizations of self, previously chosen behavior in the face of personal crises, current capacity for self-examination, and current attribution of the significance of these events.

With reference to a specific example of a challenging personal experience that you consider to be a transition moment or turning point in your life:

- *What five (5) words would you use to describe yourself at this time in your life? Explain the meaning of the words you have chosen as you understand them in reference to yourself.*
- *In the past, what have you usually done when facing challenging life experiences?*
- *How do you think the challenges you have faced have affected you? Positively? Negatively?*
- *What personality traits do you think would be helpful when facing challenging life experience? Why?*

The following questions are intended to invite collaboration and personal investment in this research process. They are designed to solicit baseline information regarding the participants' degree of facility with using the writing process to explore subjective experience. They also address the participants' current subjective experience of hopefulness, the (not explicitly targeted) goal of this intervention.

- *Have you used the writing process in the past to deal with challenging life experience? If so, in what ways?*
- *What goals do you have as a result of your participation in this project?*
- *What do you see yourself doing in five/ten years? How would you describe your attitude toward your future?*
- *What can you tell me about how writing your answers to interview questions before talking about them (and reading your answers aloud) might have made a difference in the way you answered the questions? What about the significance of the form you chose to use to write your answers (e.g. lists, paragraphs).*

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