

Exploring change in an individual's mental health: an autoethnography

by

Jolene Klaasen

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SUPERVISOR: DR L E BLOKLAND

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I declare that “Exploring change in an individual’s mental health: an autoethnography” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted from have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signed:

Jolene Klaasen

August, 2014

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores change in the researcher's mental health during a specific time period. The study more specifically focuses on identifying moments of psychological change in the researcher's narrative, as well as exploring the potential involvement of contextual factors. Increased knowledge over the occurrence of psychological change outside of the usual psychiatric and psychological interventions, can contribute towards understanding the influences that are necessary for psychological growth; eventually adding to what constitutes effective treatments. Additional value of this exploration involves the personal and professional growth of the researcher.

The autoethnographic nature of this study allows the researcher to use an evocative personal narrative as the method of presentation. The narrative consists of an autobiographical account and includes several texts that were taken from journals that the researcher kept during the period of change. An explorative process is used and aims to encourage different interpretations and, in line with a postmodern stance, takes on a conversational style to support this endeavour.

Key Terms

Autoethnography; Evocative personal narrative; Mental health; Personal growth; Postmodernism; Psychological change; Reflexivity; Social constructionism.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Girl

There is a little girl who likes to play. Reality is not her best friend.

She sees herself as living in a big forest.

She always wears the same white dress, which makes one think that time stands still for her.

She never grows older and the dress never wears out.

It's always summer in the valley where she lives.

Her days never change; she never changes. She's been seven years old for twenty years now.

There has never been any other company for her but the forest with its fields.

So, she has created her own 'friends' who protect her.

At first 'they' were only feelings, but later on she began to give them names.

They have been her way to escape...to survive.

(Journal entry: April 2008)

I wrote this story in 2008 while completing my honours degree in psychology. I was expected to hand in an assignment of choice pertaining to the subject of psychopathology, and decided to write about the issue of what is regarded as normal or abnormal behaviour in society. During that assignment I took the risk of sharing part of my own history in order to support statements I was making. Even though I used pseudonyms and fiction to share my past experience I became increasingly aware of how difficult it was for me to share specific parts of my life's story; an awareness that became even stronger as I continued my training.

The first word that comes to mind that best describes me as a child is 'afraid', and it was fear that kept me quiet, unhappy and lonely for many years. If you would ask me what I was afraid of I would have to say that I am not sure, but that I hope to learn more about this fear as I tell you my story. I was 15 years old when, for the first time, I thought of ending my life. During that time I felt to write about my death wish in one of our class assignments, and was consequently encouraged by the teacher to attend a session with an educational psychologist she knew. This was where my journey with the mental health care system started.

In 1996 (aged 17) I had my first admission to a private psychiatric clinic. I was put on medication and given a ‘name’: *the Major Depressive Disorder patient*. To a degree it was a relief to now have a name for what I struggled to understand in myself, but it also made me feel different and further away from feeling ‘normal’ and ‘belonging’ – two things that I constantly longed for. A few months later I tried to end my life by taking an overdose of medication. I woke up two days later in my own bed and learned that my mother had found me and taken me to hospital to have my stomach pumped.

Following this incidence I began to engage in self-harming behaviour. It started with an attempt to slit my wrists, which failed. However, the experience of seeing my pain through the physical injury to my body, was strangely comforting and so I started doing it more often. At first I wanted people to see my pain by letting them see the scars, but then I began to hide it and keep it secret. My behaviour got worse as I would use anything that could bring me to a near-death experience; this included drugs, binge drinking, burning myself with cigarettes, and attempts at strangling myself until I would lose consciousness.

In 1998 my ‘name’ changed to: *the Schizo-affective Disorder patient*. By this time I had had multiple admissions to private clinics during which I also received a large number of electro convulsive treatments. Towards the end of 1999 I had to be admitted to a government psychiatric hospital, where I received my last ‘change of name’: *the Major Depressive Disorder patient with psychotic features and borderline personality traits*. And, what a name! To suffer from ‘psychotic symptoms’ usually implies severe “*disease*” and is a “*poor prognostic indicator*” (Sadock & Sadock, 2007, p. 537). To ‘have borderline personality traits’ seems even worse! As this could mean that the “*disorder is fairly stable; patients change little over time*” (Sadock & Sadock, 2007, p. 800). Even though this ‘verdict’ seems to leave one with the impression that there is not really hope to change for this person who seems to suffer from such complicated ‘symptoms’, it so happened that my ‘prognosis’ turned out quite differently from what certain textbooks would predict.

If I tell you that things began to change in the year 2000 and that my life turned from pills, admissions and diagnoses to a life where I did not need such treatment or ‘names’ anymore; then I wonder whether you might ask similar questions to that which prompted me to attempt this study in the first place: How did this change happen, and what is the nature of the change? What were the possible environmental influences that could have contributed to change in my life? At this stage it might be just as important to ask the question: Why is the

occurrence of change in my narrative so important that I would want to attempt a research project on it? I suspect the answer has a lot to do with the reason why I chose to become a psychologist.

When things began to change for me; that is: when I began to enjoy a reason for being alive; when I stopped abusing substances; when I could look someone in the eye for the first time; when I became able to start loving myself; when I began to experience the joy of relationships; when I could stop using medication; this was when I realised that there was something different to my story of change. It was not medication, another admission or electroconvulsive therapy, and at the time it was also not psychotherapy. It was contact with people and families who really did not know much about psychology or psychiatry and thought differently of my struggle; who saw me as a person for whom there is hope, joy and life available rather than someone with a ‘disorder’ who needs help with managing her ‘symptoms’, her ‘mental illness’.

For years I have wondered about possible influences that encouraged psychological change in my life, because as I see it, these influences did not consist of formal psychiatric or psychological intervention at the time. It rather involved exposure to different kinds of people, families, religion, knowledge and cultures. I constantly wonder about the impact of these experiences, because I believe that more instances of positive psychological change can be possible for others if only we could learn more about the occurrences where psychological change happened outside of the usual context of treatment.

There is currently a small body of research on incidences of naturally occurring psychological change from the perspective of the person who has changed. I refer to Gianakis and Carey’s (2011) description of naturally occurring psychological change outside of the psychotherapeutic context. It is surely important to examine how people experience, understand and interpret psychological change as well as the factors that facilitate or inhibit it, since increased knowledge about such change can potentially influence what we as therapists do, how we do it, when we do it and whether we even do it (Gianakis & Carey, 2011). When I, as therapist, listen to another person’s story I often become increasingly aware of how complex we are as human beings, and that *talk-therapy* is simply one way of relating to another person; one way of trying to understand yourself or make sense of situations. I believe there are a myriad of ‘languages’ available that can ‘reach out’ to a psychologically wounded person. I am not saying that I know what these are, but I do wonder, once again,

how much more we can possibly learn or understand from exploring the cases where psychological change occurred outside of the usual formal psychiatric or psychological interventions. This is a reason why I want to study psychological change in my narrative.

Another reason for doing this study involves my hope to add to the seemingly limited amount of studies available in the social science field that explore psychological change from the researcher's personal experience. It is Vryan (2006) who states that the study of personal experience (particularly autobiography) enables access to important aspects of human experience that cannot be accessed by using other available methods of study. It gives the researcher a way to examine features of personal experience that would not normally be observable to researchers who study other people's narratives (Dauphinee, 2010; Vryan, 2006). Vryan goes on to say that no amount of interviewing or observation of a participant by a researcher will be able to produce the complexity, richness, and fullness of text that a person, as researcher and participant, may be able to document during exploration and experience of a study.

In addition to my curiosity over the occurrence of change in my life, I have come to realise the deeper importance of this study – its possible contribution towards my growth as therapist. During a conversation with my initial supervisor regarding the idea of using my personal narrative for research, I remember him telling me that such a study would support one of the hopeful outcomes of the clinical master's program at the University of Pretoria – the growth of the student as therapist and person (G. Viljoen, personal communication, July 15, 2010). It was only later that I could understand his statement, when I realised the responsibility I have towards my own growth as therapist and the impact this has on becoming a more effective therapist. It is Berger (as cited in Viljoen, 2004) who states that the practice of a therapeutic psychology cannot be separated from the personal life of the therapist. The willingness to live congruently in and out of the therapy context, and in such a way be a positive model for your client, is part of what makes you a therapeutic person (Corey, 2005).

I believe that our histories are powerful and that they influence our values, beliefs, and thoughts about people, ourselves and the world. A therapist is seen as an important instrument in the psychotherapy room and her/his most powerful technique is the ability to model aliveness and realness (Corey, 2005). My history travels with me every day and there have been times during my training as student psychologist that I wanted to leave my history

at the door so that it would not enter the room. It was a part of my story that I wanted to hide. I recall being afraid that someone would find out about my ‘mental’ history and for some reason would kindly ask me to leave the training program; because, surely a clinical psychologist cannot be an effective therapist with such diagnoses colouring her past?

Today, three years later, I am wondering at these thoughts and especially at the discourses that would lead me to interpret the world and myself in this manner. I wonder at the impact of the words ‘mental illness’, ‘Schizo-affective Disorder’, ‘Major Depressive Disorder’, ‘psychotic features’, ‘borderline personality traits’; on my concept of self and how these socially constructed terms (Walker, 2006) affected how I have been trying to find meaning and make sense of myself and my life; I wonder about the power of language on the occurrence of change in my life and the effect of interpreting my human condition as an ‘illness’ or a ‘disorder’.

The paradigm

Considering the power of language and the impact of discourse on my interpretation of the world and self, on my identity as a young adult and on my reason for being alive; I find a postmodern, social constructionist view as most appropriate for exploring these and other influences on psychological change in my story.

As part of the postmodern movement, social constructionist theory holds that our beliefs about the world are social inventions; that a person's understanding of their world and the meaning they attach to it is continually constructed through and in conversation with the people around them (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008; Hoffman, 1990). People are active participants in the construction of their own mental realities and hold the capacity to conceive a future, recall a past, make choices, and construct meaning (Hoyt, 2000). The social world is therefore continually invented and produced by individuals, and is not something that simply confronts them; in fact, society cannot exist without acting selves, and the self is in turn a product of society (Jary & Jary, 2000).

Each of us also construct our understanding and sense of the world based on our own previously held dominant beliefs, which in turn reflect the dominant beliefs of the society that we live in. These beliefs are passed on through stories that we share in conversations with one another, which play an important role in organising and maintaining our view of ourselves and our lives (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). However, for such narratives to be

shared and communicated within society there must be a commonly agreed upon system for such communication to occur, which is where the role of language comes in; a powerful role indeed.

Language is seen as the structure or vehicle through which the communication of dominant beliefs of our families and culture are passed on from one individual to the next. Gergen (1985), an eminent author in the field of social constructionism, states that language is the sounds or markings that are shared within a community. Our assumptions about reality, as well as the knowledge that we gain, arise through language (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). We make sense of the world through language and it is our means of knowing and understanding and at the same time enable us to connect with our context (Hoyt, 2000).

Gergen and College (2001) note that language is a system that both precedes and outlives the individual, and that no person who uses language can side-step this system that is actually a form of indirect cultural participation. This is because of the social history of the system of communication (the language) of that culture and how every word is given meaning and 'carries' historical experience within the understanding of the culture it belongs to. This becomes important when we think about what society regards as mentally healthy or ill. Do we know whether the behaviour that we are calling 'mentally ill' is really mental illness in itself? Can one try to describe something in a manner that is an absolute representation of what exists, with the use of language? Can language be a 'truth' bearer of what exists? Probably not; especially if language is such a socially constructed process. What we understand about mental health is certainly 'contaminated' by our society. Gergen and College state that we can never think that what we know about the world is an absolute representation of what exists, because any description or explanation of what exists will need to use language as the tool to communicate the knowledge or understanding. From the moment that language is used, a socially constructed 'contamination' automatically steps into the description and understanding that is trying to be communicated.

A postmodern approach allows me to explore the powerful role that language possibly played in my life. It further invites more than one reality to the interpretive process and embraces the understanding that no single view of reality is more or less worth than another (Agger, 1991). Different ways of understanding will yield different interpretations, which is part of my intent with this study – to explore the occurrence of psychological change from different angles, allowing different opinions to inform the conversation. This supports the

explorative nature of my research, which will employ an open, flexible and inductive manner to studying psychological change. The way in which I intend to explore and interpret my narrative is based on Wolcott's (1994) strategy to qualitative data analysis and will be discussed in more detail in "Chapter 2".

The Aim of My Study

My interest for this study lies with the occurrence of psychological change in my personal narrative as well as influences that could have contributed towards such change. The questions that I intend to use as guidance during my research are: What is it that changed? For this question I would like to identify the change that occurred, and leading to my second question: How did change happen? I want to explore possible environmental influences that could have contributed to change in my life.

The narrative I use consists of a mixture of journal entries that were done between 2002 and 2008 nested within a recently written autobiography, which serves to describe my context at the time during which the journal entries were made as well as orienting the reader to earlier events in my life. During this study no final interpretation will be sought, since the aim is to rather create a process of understanding than to reach a point of closure. Exploration, interpretation and discussion will be linked to the interplay of larger social influences on my life (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000), and supports the research design of this study, which is of an autoethnographic nature.

As researcher my intent is to encourage conversation throughout this study, thereby inviting different opinions into the explorative and interpretive processes; encouraging conversation between different 'voices' – my voice as 'patient', as therapist, and as researcher, your voice as reader and participant, and the voices of theories from different authors. My aim is not to convey a specific message or convince you of my interpretation, but rather to create an expanding space for you, the reader, to encourage a plurality of meanings and to embrace many interpretations (Nel, 2006). Researchers are frequently advised to narrow down the scope of study to make it methodologically more manageable, which could encourage closure and containment too quickly (Viljoen, 2004). The complexity in research should rather be embraced so that understanding can emerge from a complex web of ideas instead of searching for simple answers to simplified questions. Out of the complexity there could emerge meaningful constructions that were not identified prior to the research process.

Style and Structure

Since the aim is for conversation to be a central construct in this research, the reader will find that the style of language in this study veers away from the usual prescribed academic convention. I have deliberately chosen to write in a conversational style as I find that conversation has been an intricate part of the development of this study so far. It is through different conversations with various individuals, texts and self that the idea of this research was constructed, and that learning and knowledge could evolve.

I have also decided to write in first-person as it seems to have a rather disconnecting effect using words such as 'the researcher' or 'the individual' in a study where I am referring to my own story and experiences. My use of a first-person voice allows me to take responsibility for my work rather than attempting to erase my subjective experience (Nel, 2006). Maguire (2006) feels that a first-person approach is a conscious positioning of the author/researcher that can open up possibilities for evocative, innovative ways to represent realities, the researcher's self, as well as other participants in the texts. Bakhtin (as cited in Maguire, 2006) proposes that such a style "invokes a much-needed dialogue between self and others in human inquiry" (p. 2), and makes the self of the researcher answerable for the authoring of its responses.

Hall (as cited in Nabal, 2009) mentions that an informal manner of writing disobeys the laws of the world of Academic Dissertations, but an informal writing style can serve the purpose of easily created and accessible information to both academic and non-academic readers. I agree with Richardson (2000) who states that:

I desire my work to be both 'scientific' and 'literary': scientific in the sense of being true to the world known through the empirical senses – and literary – in the sense of expressing what one has learned through evocative, creative writing and form. (p. 253)

The way in which this study is structured might strike some readers as different from the usual framework used to convey qualitative work. I have decided to conform to Wolcott's (as cited in Silverman, 2005) suggestion of not creating a separate literature review chapter that may seem disconnected from the study, but rather introducing related research and various theoretical interpretations as part of the interpretative and discussion phases towards the end of the study. I believe that this supports the aesthetic value of my study as story.

My narrative is presented in the form of an autobiography with direct quotations of journal entries accompanying the story, serving as descriptions and elaborations of feelings and thoughts from my past experiences. The scenes and expressions that are taken from my journals are loosely arranged in the time frame of the autobiography so that these are more convenient to read.

My text is presented as a self-reflective, autoethnographic narrative written in a personal voice, and my wish is to stress the journey over the destination (Nel, 2006). My hope is to immerse readers to a point where you can participate emotionally and intellectually; that the text will be used rather than analysed; told and retold rather than theorized and settled; that it will encourage further conversation rather than matchless truths (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). My intention is to stay true to a postmodern style in which I present ‘readings’ and not ‘observations’; ‘interpretations’ and not ‘findings’ (Nel, 2006).

Outline of the Study

“Chapter 1” serves as an introduction and communicates the rationale to this study. It also comments on my paradigm and highlights the method, style and structure that I plan to implement. “Chapter 2” is a more in-depth discussion on my philosophical stance, the autoethnographic design and method of this research as well as certain ethical concerns. “Chapter 3” is an autobiographical account that reflects an interpretation of my life as a child within my family and culture, and takes the reader through a description of various experiences that I lived through between 1987 and 2008. “Chapter 4” will draw from Wolcott’s (1994) approach to interpretation while exploring psychological change in the narrative as well as possible influences that might have led to the occurrence of change in my life. The chapter also enters into conversation with relevant literature while reflecting on prominent themes that become apparent during exploration. “Chapter 5” reflects on the process of the study and concludes with shortcomings of this particular study as well as ideas and questions for future conversations.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research

My decision to use a qualitative approach allows me to engage in an interpretive manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and places emphases on the quality and depth of information rather than the scope or breadth of it (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The qualitative paradigm focuses on the social construction of people's ideas and concepts and assumes that reality consists of an individual's mental constructions of the objects with which she or he engages. 'Truth' is therefore not seen as an objective phenomenon that exists independently of the researcher, and a way of knowing reality is by exploring the experiences of the individual.

An Autoethnographic Design

Autoethnography is defined by Maguire (2006) as a reflexive project of selfhood that locates the self within socio-cultural contexts, linking it to larger domains of society and history. It is therefore a research design that mostly involves personalised accounts in which the author (researcher) draws on her/his own lived experiences within a particular context. Such personal experience is usually presented as narratives of the self and aims to further investigate issues raised within the research questions pertaining to the study (Sparkes, 2000).

Autoethnographic texts can be presented in a variety of ways: short stories, poetry, journals, photographic, personal essays, fragmented and layered writing. Researchers also usually differ in the emphasis that they put on the research process (graphy), culture (ethnos) and self (auto) when it comes to autoethnographic studies (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

In this dissertation you will encounter short scenes and poems taken from journal entries. These will contribute to creating a rich, honest and detailed description and interpretation of my past experiences. My aim is to create an evocative personal narrative for this study, which is a type of autoethnography that focuses on narrative presentations that open up conversations between reader and text by evoking emotional responses (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008), aiming to engage you as reader into a meaningful understanding of my personal and societal context (Chang, 2008). Anderson (2006) is particularly critical of this kind of autoethnographical

writing, saying that it is often not situated in theory and does not bother to relate the personal experience back to the context in which it occurred. Coffey (as cited in Maguire, 2006) speaks further criticism over this methodology of first-person narrative by suggesting that it limits the process of inquiry to what 'I' can say about my subject and subjectivity.

However, Ellis and Bochner (2006) have countered some of these arguments by saying that the goal of a more emotional style of writing is to open up conversations about how people live, rather than to close it down with definite descriptions and analytic statements of the world as it 'truly' is outside the occurrence of language and culture. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) further argue that autoethnography rather expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, avoiding rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful, useful research.

Autoethnography begins with a personal story and draws upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purpose of extending sociological understanding (Wall, 2008). The actual 'doing' of autoethnography involves a complex back-and-forth studying of parts in relation to the whole, and the whole in relation to parts. No final interpretation is sought, because the aim is to rather create a process of understanding than to reach a point of closure.

The Texts

The texts I am using consist of an autobiography and interpretation of my childhood, culture, religion and family life; and serves to inform and orient the reader to the wider context and discourses I had been exposed to. Within this narrative there are a number of written expressions that were mostly done a few years after the actual experiences occurred. I call these *recollections of experiences*. There are also a number of journal entries consisting of fragments of a fictional story that I began to write in 2002 which resulted from an attempt to engage with, and express, my inner frustrations and conflict. I title these as *scenes* and they are written in an allegorical style. These scenes from my journals were not originally written in a logical manner with a carefully planned plot or fully developed characters. I have decided to leave the scenes in their original form so that you, as reader, may share my experience of frustration and disconnection during that time; which encouraged my desperate search for meaning, belonging and understanding.

Exploration and Interpretation

In telling stories of my past experiences, I am trying to make sense of what these experiences mean. Gadamer (as cited in Widdershoven, 1993) notes that the meaning of a text is created in the history of its interpretations, since interpretation is really a form of dialogue towards mutual understanding between different ‘voices’ from past and present.

For this dissertation I will be using Wolcott’s (1994) suggestion of exploring and interpreting qualitative research. Wolcott states that qualitative data can be transformed through any one, or a combination of, three approaches: description, analysis and/or interpretation. Description refers to telling the story of the data in as descriptive a way as possible (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). According to Wolcott, “Description is the foundation upon which qualitative research is built...Here you become the storyteller, inviting the reader to see through your eyes what you have seen...” (p. 28).

Wolcott (1994) sees analysis as a process of expanding and extending the data beyond a descriptive account, while the emphasis is on identifying key factors and relationships. It is a cautious and controlled process that involves the identification of essential features and relationships. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) feels that this analytical process is a research activity that is not simply confined to the latter stages of the research project; that it is not a separate set of procedures applied to a static body of data. Analysis is rather a “pervasive activity throughout the life of the research project” (p. 11). Tesch (as cited in Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) explains analysis as a reflexive activity that is comprehensive and systematic, but not rigid. Analysis is not about following one correct approach or set of techniques, but should be imaginative, artful, flexible and reflexive; while at the same time being intellectually rigorous and scholarly.

The process of interpretation involves the researcher’s attempt towards understanding and explaining the work that is being studied (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). For my study this would involve understanding in context – the context in which I wrote the scenes and expressions, because the meaning of any human creation should be understood against the background of the personal and social context in which it occurred. For this reason a text should be placed back into its context and there understood (Terre Blanche, Kelly, & Durrheim, 2006). Since this is a study in which I am a participant as well as the researcher, the process of interpretation should involve constant awareness of, and reflection on,

potential aspects that may influence my interpretations. I need to be aware that I enter this dissertation with certain beliefs and assumptions regarding the human condition, and that this influences my interpretations.

I do believe that analysis and interpretation have already been a constant part of the development of my research and that I have had to engage in these ways of *data transformation* (as Wolcott would term it) throughout this dissertation. Interpretation does not only start with “Chapter 4”. I am already rendering an interpretation of my experiences when I describe to you my story in “Chapter 3”, or when I share the journey that encouraged me to decide on this topic. The discourses that I have been part of and the experiences I have been exposed to shape my view of what it means to be in psychological distress; and to be exposed to certain influences that encourage a process of change.

Should I Tell or Should I Hide?

I include only a selective number of texts from my journals, which poses the question of how I decide which texts to disclose or not. Ellis (as cited in Wall, 2008) proposes that in autoethnography the writer should tell a story that allows the reader to enter into, and feel part of, a story that includes emotions and personal detail, and also examines the meaning of human experience. It is a form of writing that should allow the reader to feel the dilemmas and to think with the story rather than think about it; an active engagement between reader and author. The texts that I choose will therefore have a certain evocative, emotionally engaging quality to it so that my readers may more easily engage with my story.

Wall (2008) mentions that autobiographical writing is based on complex processes of knowing and not knowing, of being and not being exposed. Various discourses that I, as researcher, am exposed to will influence my decisions concerning which narratives I include or not. Weingarten (1998) states that discourse powerfully shapes the stories we can tell, the stories we can hear, and that which we think others can hear. It influences what we can know and not know, see and not see, say and not say, in complex and subtle ways.

My decision to disclose certain information and stories, yet keep some of it confidential, will also be influenced by my knowledge and understanding of the audience that will read my study (Rosenthal, 1993). My audience will mostly consist of academically oriented readers, and this is also a study with certain academic rules to which I should conform. The texts that I include will therefore be limited to that which is related to the

research questions. As my research questions focus on psychological change (identifying change; exploring the nature of the change as well as possible environmental influences to change), I am therefore more prone to include texts that (I believe) are related to this issue based on my assumptions and knowledge of psychological change. I have to admit that I do have certain preconceived ideas regarding factors that have potentially contributed to change in my life. Some of these are my view on the impact of religion; being exposed to communities of people who had adopted a different view on the cause, presence and future of mental ‘illness’; exposure to other family systems as well as the acquisition of knowledge over time. This is something I need to be aware of during my exploration and interpretation of psychological change.

Langdrige (2007) describes awareness as a type of engagement in which the researcher continuously reflects on the impact of certain influences. To engage in a reflective manner with my study is to be aware of the impact of my history on the question(s) that are being explored as well as the psychological knowledge that is being produced in this study (Langdrige, 2007). I may want to avoid certain questions and focus more on others, since I may still feel afraid of being labelled or feeling different and separate from the rest of society. I realise that my experience could cause me to be very careful with what I share and which questions I am willing to publicly ask regarding my story.

My ethical concern over my own care as researcher who is sharing a lot of deeply personal information would also guide what I share or not. Being aware that what I share today could have a positive or negative impact on my career tomorrow, is certainly something I am conscious of and will most probably affect what I choose to share.

Ethical Considerations

As I am conducting research on my personal narrative I should constantly be mindful that I am not only telling my story, but to some degree also my family’s story and my culture’s story. In other words, even though I will be using written accounts and interpretations of my own experience these texts are not void of a social world; of people who were and/or are part of my life (Schurink, 2006). Medford (2006) proposes an ethic of accountability regarding this issue. She encourages autoethnographers to write as if one’s writing will be accessible to everyone that are indirectly involved as the story is told; you should write in such a manner as if the relative or friend that you are writing about will be in

the audience that will read your work. The reason for this is that it brings with it a certain level of responsibility to the researcher, and Medford takes this further by saying that we should hold ourselves to high ethical standards so that we are fully accountable, not just responsible, for our writing.

Another area of ethical concern lies in the sharing of my personal experience and involves relational ethics, which refers to an ethics of care for myself as researcher (Ellis, 2007). Ellis (2007) brings certain aspects to awareness for those who attempt autoethnography by saying that one should be mindful of how you may be constructed by others after disclosing your story. Sharing such personal information with readers puts me in a vulnerable position and may impact on my relationships with colleagues and friends or family.

Some of the scenes from journals used in this study are presented as allegory (true to the original form it was written in), and I believe that such fictional representation of personal experience may have an advantage with regards to relational ethics. Fictional representation allows me to represent the principles of my story in a truthful manner, yet with 'freedom' of variations in accuracy to some of the story's content (Sparkes, 2002). Angrosino (as cited in Sparkes, 2002) states that fictional techniques allow the researcher to get to the truth of her experience as well as truth about her experiences in the world, and without having to reveal specific details that might tie the story to any one identifiable person in any one situation.

Trustworthiness

Holt (2003) mentions that the evaluation of autoethnographic research is problematic, because who decides what is regarded as a good story? What must be added or taken away for a story to be scholarly? And how does one derive concepts from stories and then use these concepts to understand people in more general terms (Josselson, 1993)? Autoethnography is at the boundaries of academic research, because it does not seem to sit comfortably with traditional criteria that are usually used to judge qualitative research (Holt, 2003).

Sparkes (as cited in Holt, 2003) states that the techniques used to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research are usually of an evaluative nature and should rather not be used to judge autoethnographic studies. It is suggested that attention should be given to constructive rather than evaluative techniques to establish the 'trustworthiness' of the autoethnographic study. Richardson (2000) describes the criteria that she uses when

reviewing personal narrative papers. The criteria consist of various questions: Does the text contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the text succeed aesthetically – is it complex, artistically shaped and not boring? How has the author's subjectivity been both producer and a product of the text? What is the impact of the text on the reader – emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or actions from the reader? Does the text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? Such questions can also guide me, as researcher, through the process of writing and reflecting so that the text does not become too self-indulgent, or on the other end, too academic and without depth to the story. I aim to keep this in mind while continuing on to the next chapter, which is an account of my life story.

CHAPTER 3

THE STORY INSIDE

I often dream of a different place; another world. In reality it does not exist, but with imagination it does. Without it I might not have survived. It has been my place of escape, my book of explanation and my map of understanding. I doubt if any other way would have made more sense to me than this. (Journal entry: October, 2008).

This chapter contains fragments of my narrative, taken from journal entries which I kept during a time in my life when I was trying to make sense of, and reflect on, various experiences. My story is by nature a disjointed account of my life as I delve into moments of my journey. I have attempted to structure my narrative into an autobiographical expression of my past. I deliberately choose to expose the reader to the disjointedness of my interpretation of this story, as this is a more accurate representation of my experience of the world at the time. My inner world was a fragmented world in which the broken parts of my Self were constantly trying to make sense of life, and form an identity. It was the isolated parts from past experiences that had never been given ‘names’ that were struggling to become part of me; to be one with me...to be me.

I wrote my first journal entry during my admission in 1999. There were no sentences, only words that seemed disconnected from each other. In the year 2000 I began to structure my words into ‘poems’ with no rhyme or rhythm and it mostly did not make sense to anyone else but me. In 2002 I started entering into conversations with God and my Self in my journals and wrote in sentences while sharing my thoughts and opinions. Towards the end of 2003 I found myself writing about two ‘places’, two experiences – my inner world and my outer world. I called my inner world, *Woodland* and my outer world, *The Real World*. My style of writing became more allegorical as I started to identify and give names to what I was feeling inside. During the five years that followed, I grew in my awareness of what I felt inside and eventually decided to engage as much as I could with these feelings through writing about it in my journals. I experienced it as a ‘foreign world’ that I had to explore; a *Woodland* in which I lived, and in my *Woodland* I met the enemies and friends that were constantly with me – Fear, Anger, Failure, Perfection, Loneliness, Imagination, and Death. I was also fortunate to meet with Love, Hope and Faith.

My conversations with these enemies and friends (retrieved from journal entries) are weaved into the narrative that I am about to tell; it will expose you, as reader, to my attempt at understanding my inner struggle and trying to find meaning during that period. To express myself through writing was one way in which I began to reconstruct my view of self and the world.

The Dreamer

I was the child who was born eight years after my only sister; who went to preschool at the age of three when my mother had to go back to work; who cried for a week when the preschool teacher took away my favourite pillow and hung it on the wall so I would not cling to it for dear life; who was very angry with my mother when she did not allow me to choose my own suitcase for preschool; who got my first hiding at the age of three when I spilled my father's drink; who had to go through eight minor operations to receive grommets in my ears; who would lie on the bathroom floor for hours until the nausea went away; who did not understand why my parents had to leave for an overseas trip for two weeks when I was six years old.

It was me who needed my favourite blanket to sleep with until I was seven years old; who demanded that my mother bring me water or milk at night in a purple cup; who constantly wanted to eat the dog's pellets as a daily 'snack' and who ran away when I saw a mosquito bite me for the first time. It was me who imagined myself to be Buck Rogers in a space ship every afternoon after I watched the programme on television; who created my own Buck Rogers attire from my dad's old army belt and empty holster and would play in my 'space shuttle' for hours; who learned to ride a bicycle on the metre wide cement edges surrounding the swimming pool and fell in too many times; who only had the little boy across the street to play with and the German lady next door to visit; who felt safe to sit in a big carton box in the living room; who saw a man killed in a motorbike accident in a movie and did not want anyone to know that I cried about it; who did not dare to move around in church in fear of my dad giving me 'the look'; who had to change schools three times in one year as we relocated to different provinces; and who slowly began to experience the world as unsafe and lonely. I was that child.

I was a shy child who felt afraid to ask questions or share my thoughts. I did not want to make mistakes and would spend a lot of time and energy on doing things right...perfect, if I could, because then I would get the attention that would made me feel adequate. I was a

dreamer and inventor of things my parents could not afford. I could play with Lego for hours and build all the ‘worlds’ I longed to visit – ships, houses, hospitals, fire brigades, farms and cars. I constantly wondered how electrical appliances worked and always wanted to make something that could move or light up. I watched for hours how my dad would build cupboards or fix the car, and would stand next to him handing over the tools. I did not like the kitchen, because I was forced to help with dishes. I did not like piano lessons, because I was slow in reading the notes. But I could listen to the different instruments in an ensemble and remember the sounds; I could hear it in my head for hours and sometimes days until it disappeared.

I believed that adults were more important than children, because they knew more about many things that I did not know about. I believed that I had to obey my parents no matter what and that God would punish me if I did not. The rule was that children may be seen, but should not be heard. To me this meant that I had to be a quiet child and especially when we went to visit my parents’ friends or family, because what would other people say if I was a naughty child. I was afraid of my dad’s eyes and his tone of voice. I was supposed to do things his way or else...or else I would remember that I was making too many mistakes and that I needed ‘fixing’; that I needed physical punishment to be ‘fixed’; that I was a really bad child with little significance.

I had a few good friends at school, but seldom invited any of them to my house. My house never felt as nice as anyone else’s home. It was too cold, too quiet, and too fearful. As a teenager I made my boots look like ‘Doc Martins’ and sprayed my bicycle frame so it would look more expensive. I did not like birthdays, because I always felt uncomfortable for some reason...almost as if I was lying about something; about being joyful over the day I was born and about celebrating life. I believed that failure happened if I did not try hard enough to be good enough, and I believed that failure was a very bad thing that should never happen because it would signal the end to many things. I believed that if I tried hard enough life would be okay and if life became too difficult it was my own fault; that if I was struggling, no one would help, because it was my fault. I understood that I could not count on other people to protect me and that I had to face the world on my own.

My idea of God was that He was far away, angry, strict, and old. I had to do something spectacular before God would look my way. I believed that dreams had no use, because adults would just end up telling you otherwise. I believed that my opinion did not

matter and that I should rather listen to other people because they knew better; that I was not clever; that I was too slow; that I was not important enough for other people; that emotional struggles and suffering were my own fault and that no one was interested in how I was doing.

I stopped smiling when I was nine years old; it was just too much effort. I remember being home alone in the afternoons after school. My sister was there sometimes, but we did not really speak to each other since I was eight years younger and we would quarrel more than anything else. I took part in athletics, karate and piano lessons and my parents were both in fulltime employment at the time. The world seemed lonely, quiet and distant while I felt small, unable and far behind. I remember one specific day in grade three, when I received results on the mathematics test I wrote earlier that week. I felt devastated because I did not do as well as my friend who got her usual 80 percent. For the first time in my life I received 64 percent for a test. To me it felt like the end of the world. It was very important to me to ‘fit in’ or ‘be like’ my friend; the one who was admired by most and just seemed to know how to ‘be enough’. I cried for hours until my mom came home, but was too afraid to tell her; afraid she would think it was my fault. It added to my feeling of not being good enough and doing too many things wrong.

(Journal entry: 2003)

Failure

I had a meeting with Failure today. He was late again as usual. He's one of my oldest friends and can be very tiring at times. With Failure there is one condition: I need to carry him on my back all the time and it's so tiring. I often wish that I never met Failure. Life has been harder since I came to be friends with him. I don't feel comfortable when I'm with him and he often makes me cry. I don't know what it is about him that suffocates me so much when we're together.

No matter how hard I try nothing I do is ever good enough for him. The standards he sets are always higher than even my best attempt and if I strike it lucky to reach this standard he would surely find something that could later prove me wrong. I often ask myself why I am friends with him. But, on the other hand, if it wasn't for Failure I would never have met Perfection. I like Perfection, because she helps me to cope with Failure. Failure tends to break me down with his words and when this happens Perfection helps me to cope again.

But I accept Failure as he is and sometimes this means I have to change myself to fit in with him. I guess that's what friends are for – to sacrifice one's self for the other; except, this only seems to be coming from my side. He never says a word about me. Everything is always about him and how I should become more like him to be able to reach his standard of excellence. He never asks me for my opinion. He never tries to become like me, I always have to become like him.

I don't like a friendship like this. I want to tell Failure that I don't want to be friends with him anymore, but I'm afraid of his response. I've heard that when you tell him that the friendship is over it causes even worse problems. He might decide to haunt you every day until you are forced to conform to his style of living. I'm afraid of this, so I think it's best to let it be and continue with the friendship as it is.

During my teenage years life became just another 'thing' to do every day, every month and every year. The sense I had was that I had no idea who I was, where I was going or why, and nothing really seemed to matter much anymore. I tried being good at sport, but struggled to believe in myself. I found it too frustrating that I could not change the feelings I were experiencing. I felt useless, distant, afraid, angry, and sad. I grew quiet and avoided contact with people. I did not know how to tell my parents that I was beginning to hate everything; myself, and them. How could I possibly explain it so that anyone would understand? I felt that no one really knew who I was; me neither, and I believed it was a mistake that I was like this; that I was to blame for this problem of not knowing who I was and having too many feelings that felt scrambled up inside, because it never seemed that anyone else in the family were having such struggles. Or maybe they were just very good at hiding it. I thought that no person was safe enough to share with, and I was afraid that trying would make things worse; that I would be a bigger problem for the family.

Why was I a problem? Because I did not smile enough, my face looked too angry and answering my mom in a respectful manner was too difficult. Respect was to not speak too loud, to be obedient, to not talk back, to do what I was told without questioning, to not speak my thoughts, to not slam a door, to not do anything too loud, to not bother people and to not be a burden...to keep quiet and not be a nuisance. If I was able to do all these things then I would make my family happy, and if they were happy I was 'good enough', acceptable, worthy and not the problem.

At the age of 15 I began to wish that my life would end because then, I thought, everything would be easier and better. The rebellious, lying, angry, sad teenager would be gone and my parents would be happy. I would stop smoking and binge drinking in secret; I would stop existing. I was quiet most of the time even though I had more to say about life than ever before. One day at school the teacher asked me about comments I made in an assignment regarding the meaning of life. I said that I hated life and wanted to end it. She said that I should maybe speak to someone first. So, on her referral, I went to see an educational psychologist who talked a lot, smelled strongly of perfume, and kept hugging me too tight. I appeared lifeless, distant, and did not bother to listen. It helped if someone touched me; as if it reminded me of where I was. I continued to see her, but nothing changed. As time went by I felt even more distant from people and more comfortable to be on my own and to go to places in my mind where I felt safe and secure. I was not part of the world, I thought; I was too different; therefore, I was not human. I saw myself as a machine that did not feel anything. It would be okay if I just disappeared; it would be okay if I could go away from life, because if I could leave life then I would be fine. If I could manage to die, then I would survive.

Dustbin Day

It was on a Saturday when I chose to fetch a knife from the kitchen drawer with which I was going to slit my wrists so that I could hopefully end my inner turmoil. My mom was at work and my dad was busy mowing the lawn while I was in my room contemplating suicide. I was 17 years old and this was the first time that I tried to end my life. The good news is that I did not manage to cut through any major artery that caused enough blood loss for it to be fatal. Instead, I became frightened by the immense pain that I felt while trying to do it and stopped after a while. The bad news is that this was my introduction to self-harming behaviour and it continued for years until I could learn different ways of coping.

Dustbin day

(Journal entry: May, 2002 – a recollection of an earlier experience)

I don't know why I choose to do it this way; with a knife. I just grabbed the first thing that I saw. I don't know why I'm doing this.

Today I'm the lead character in a movie with cameras all over my room watching me. The audience knows what I'm thinking. I am also part of the audience. I can tell that they're

enjoying watching me. I can hear their praises. This will fix me; this will punish me enough that I listen and become a better person.

This knife is sharper than the other one. I need a bucket. I don't want to stain the carpet. The knife feels sharp. I press hard and pull... This is my language. This is how I scream for help.

I'm a genius. No one will know what I did. They won't see. I'm safe. It's my secret...

I did not know how to verbalise what I was feeling and I unfortunately found temporary relief from hurting and harming my physical body. I created physical wounds so that my emotional pain would somehow seem more concrete, and so that I could spend time and effort to care for and nurture my physical wounds afterwards...almost as if to give myself the emotional nurturance I was deeply yearning for.

During that same year there was another incident when I decided to stop talking and eating. I was tired of trying to 'be'. I could not see how I would ever be able to be strong, beautiful or good enough for my parents, myself, and everyone else. I did not care anymore either, because it was all a lie. Everything around me seemed like a lie because "everyone is fine" and as a family we had "no complaints and doing well". Any conflict or argument was "no one's fault" and emotions were "your own problem" or "making an issue out of nothing".

This was the day that I decided to show what was really inside of me. I wanted my parents to feel what I had been feeling for so long – silence and hopelessness. I came home from school, went to lie on my bed and did not speak to anyone for two days. I did not want to eat or change my clothes. I was aware of what I was doing, but the hate and hopelessness in me weighed much more than my need for food or to care what others would think of me. I used to be the compliant child and teenager by doing what I was told and being 'responsible' and 'respectful', but my anger grew larger than my fear on that day. My mother did not know what to do and on the second day she started screaming at me out of frustration, asking why I was being like this. My dad decided to not get involved; he turned around and continued watching television. My sister was not living with us anymore. She left home six years earlier.

After three days my parents phoned my best friend's father, who was a psychiatrist. He came to our house and looked at me for a long time while I was telling him something about a desert and a camel; that I felt like a camel in a desert with nothing around me. The

world was nowhere. Three days later he said something about depression and chemical imbalance to my parents, and to me: "...you are ill".

Life

(Journal entry: June, 2002 – a recollection of an earlier experience)

My will to live grows dim. I don't know what I can do to light my torch of hope again. I can't see anything in front of me; it's too dark and dense. My clothes are wet from the fog...my body's going to be cold soon. I want to stop here and not walk any further. Maybe then the night's darkness will go away. How am I supposed to walk if I can't see anyway? There are no road signs. I will sit here and wait. I'm tired...

The decision was that I was to be excused from school for two weeks and be admitted to a private psychiatric clinic to "assess the situation". No one was to know my whereabouts, because "she's got psychological problems" and this was not a good sentence to share with other people. Maybe it was too 'uncommon' for the year of 1996 when this happened. I received sleep therapy for the first few days and was put on anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medication for the first time in my life. During the first week I became suspicious of one of the nursing staff and was convinced that she was out to kill me. I did not want to socialise with anyone, since I became very afraid of staff and patients. I experienced moments when I did not know what I was doing and could not remember afterwards either. It felt as if I was in a dream and constantly walking on clouds. During the second week I gradually became dizzy and more nauseous every day, until one morning when it felt like the whole room was spinning when I woke up. When the nurse spoke to me her voice seemed so far away that I almost could not hear. Later that day I began to vomit until the next morning when the doctor came in to "assess the situation". It was found that the dosage was too strong for me and so the doctor lowered it. Two days later I was stable and able to socialise and take part in occupational therapy and other ward activities. I was discharged after three weeks and went back to school to finish my grade-12 year. Soon after, I decided to stop taking the medication due to its side effects.

Life continued and I did not know what to make of it, so I listened to my mother and went to study landscaping in 1997. During my stay in the hostel I realised that my roommate was struggling with depression. After six months I got called in by the house mother of the hostel to hear that my roommate felt that I was not a good influence on her. I remember

telling the roommate of my hospital admissions when she asked about the scars on my arms and that was as much as she knew about me. As the house mother explained to me and my parents: I had the ‘history’ and I did not inform the hostel of this prior to my stay; if I did then they would have taken the precaution of putting me in a single room. I was asked to leave the hostel and was given a referral to go and see a psychiatrist. To this day I do not know what my roommate told them, but it seems it was serious enough to get me removed. Two months later I quit the course and consequently ended up with another admission to my name. I felt that I had failed, again. This incidence increased my sense of being different, of not fitting in, of falling behind, of not being accepted, of having no reason to live and of not feeling part of the human race. It was a lonely feeling.

(Journal entry: March 2002)

Loneliness is quiet. It stares at me most of the time. Sometimes I like having it with me, but I don't want it all the time. When I spend too much time with it I become sad...too sad. Please don't come closer; Loneliness, I don't want to feel you.

(Journal entry: March 2002)

Death, I like you. Sometimes you're quiet and sometimes you're noisy. Some say you are ugly and do bad things, but I don't think they understand you. They're not friends with you like I am. You know what I want even if it's bad for me.

I like listening to your songs, watching your movies, reading your stories and carving out your name on my arm. You make me feel special and you always have time for me. I don't try to explain you to people anymore, because it's useless to try and make them understand if they've never met you before. They only hear your name and they run. You're not soft or loving or peaceful, but at least you don't leave me or get angry when I do something wrong.

Take me to the place where you live, Death, please? I don't want to be on earth anymore. Can you come and fetch me; today please, if possible? I like you. I want to go and live with you. I don't want life.

The new psychiatrist decided to start with a different combination of medication than what I was on previously; she also decided to administer eight electro convulsive treatments as she believed this would have a more immediate effect on my low mood. After the seventh treatment something in me felt different. The world seemed brighter and lighter, which only lasted until the eighth treatment when I woke up with no memory of anything. I did not know my name or where I was. I wondered whose clothes were in the cupboard in my room; I did

not know who did the pencil sketches that were lying in my drawer and I could not remember why I was in hospital. Most of my memory returned over time, but some of it never returned. I felt more distant and I could not feel emotions anymore. Everything felt the same...like nothing. I was a machine, I thought, that just had to keep going. Nothing and no one mattered; nothing existed. I was somewhere.

The Red Fire Truck

After discharge I went home to sleep, smoke, eat, binge drink over weekends with an old school friend and watch TV. By then I had engaged in self-harming behaviour more often and had difficulty hiding the scars. I decided to start cutting the skin on my thighs and stomach since I could hide those more easily. I did not want people to see; I did not believe that they would understand and I did not know what to tell them if they saw. It was mine, I thought, my secret way of trying to cope. No one needed to know.

(Journal entry: February, 2005)

We all have scars. Some can hide their scars, but others cannot 'cause the bucket's too full; it spills over so everyone sees. I don't like for people to know. I never wanted them to see, but now it's done. My inside is printed on my outside. Arms, body; speaking my language. People just run away from me.

Run! They're afraid. Run! They don't understand. Run! Don't look back. "Who would do such a thing?" "Let's get away from her while we can".

This self-harming behaviour became worse as I took comfort in it and especially during stressful times. It became my secret addiction.

(Journal entry: August, 2002 – a recollection of an experience)

I have to do it. It's like food to something deep inside of me. It's a hunger that needs to be fed. This addiction...it fills me. I feel accepted by it. It never pushes me away.

I have thought about this before; if I can just press hard enough and draw the blade very slowly through my skin it will be enough. I will not think of the stinging pain while doing it. I will think of a song. Then it's easy.

(Journal entry: April, 2005)

At times, everything in me screams to stop, to give up. I will not stop. I will not give up. I will not run away. Was it anyone's fault? Who is to blame? Because then we will feel better, right? Blaming someone would take care of guilt and then everyone will be able to carry on with life as it was before; before I disrupted everything.

When I'm in a pit I don't know what's wrong and no one can tell me where the problem is. I feel out of touch with my inside. I cannot communicate my inside. Even as I call for help no one can hear me because they don't seem to understand my 'language'. How do you scream for help if no one can hear you or understand you?

Do you think I do it because I figured people would give me some attention? Is that it? Is that the best you can do?

Have you ever seen death? Have you ever reached the point where nothing else matters but how you can manage to escape this world? Have you ever thought so little of yourself that you didn't care what you looked like; that even if your body had scars all over, it wouldn't bother you? Has fear ever been your closest friend for longer than a few moments in life?

When I cut my skin it will always bleed; the blood will stop and the wound will heal and I will take care of it. This doesn't change; it is consistent. The bigger the wound the longer I can care for it, look at it, and feel better. To harm myself is to punish myself, and the more I can punish myself the closer I can come to being a better person. I just need punishment to fix me.

My parents tried what they could. They took me to psychologists and hoped for answers. I remember a psychologist whom I went to for one session, during which he asked me about my dreams in life. I shared my one wish at the time; that I wanted to become an astronaut. I believed that astronauts were unique people who were admired by everyone. I wanted to be that; I wanted to be unique and admired. He told me it was possible and that we could work on it. I thought he was talking nonsense, so I never went back. Then there was the doctor in psychology who asked me to sit at a small table on a tiny chair and draw a house and my family while she spoke to my father in the next room. I could not get my legs under the table and felt as though she did not recognise me: Did you not see that I am tall? Could you not maybe have invited me to sit at a bigger table with a bigger chair? Do you realise that

I am not nine years old? Why do you want me to draw a person? I was angry and did not draw for her; I also did not want go back to see her again.

Two years after finishing high school my dad and I drove past the fire brigade one day when I asked him to stop. There were red fire trucks and ambulances standing outside the station and they had so much detail to them that I wanted to take a closer look. I loved looking at these man-made marvels with V12 engines that carried so much equipment and had thousands of litres of water in a tank on the back. Of course I only learned this after having a conversation with an emergency worker who was inspecting the vehicles. He sent me to speak to the station officer and after another conversation I started working as a volunteer a week later. My job was to extinguish “veld” fires during winter months and assist on ambulances at other times. A year later I was given a part time job and was sent for eight weeks of training in fire technology in Boksburg. We were three who were sent from our station and joined trainees from other areas in Johannesburg.

Your name was “Rookie” and you had to wear full fire kit every morning during the three hour physical training which involved anything from running up and down a six storey stairway because one of the guys did not shave, pushing a car tire across a rugby field while lying on your stomach, or climbing over walls with your tire. Your tire was your ‘buddy’ and sometimes your ‘patient’ that you had to carry to places and lift over walls. Some days you heard that you had to enter underground storm-water pipes with your nine-kilogram breathing apparatus on your back; that you had to go down in a team of six, keep calm, work together, follow the left hand rule and try to find the exit in pitch black darkness. We had to extinguish fires on gas tanks, learn to work together and to trust your leader. In the afternoons we received teaching on everything that had to do with fires and equipment. We wrote assignments and the final exam was to survive 10 minutes in a burning furnace while seeking for ‘victims’ and dragging the dummies with you as you found them.

It was stressful and I struggled, but with every task I could accomplish I felt more able to accomplish something. Throughout the course I continued with my medication (anti-psychotic, anti-depressant, and anti-convulsion medication), which affected my concentration and ability to perform physically. In the end we passed the course and went back to our stations. My job description was to assist other staff members during motor vehicle accidents, house fires and ambulance calls. I sometimes enjoyed the work, but it was not easy. For the first time in my life I saw a decomposed body of a man hanging under a tree one day when

we were busy extinguishing a “veld” fire. On other days the motor vehicle accidents became too much for me; to see body parts lying around; to witness a suicide attempt; to hear the families crying; to try and ignore a lady’s broken femur bone piercing through her skin while calming her down as they were trying to free her from the wreckage.

Apart from that there were the more difficult relational issues between myself and another colleague at the station. This man in particular started abusing me verbally and physically at times without anyone’s knowledge. I was too afraid to tell anyone and eventually decided to abscond one day during office hours after another incident. The station officer was made aware of the situation and came to my house to apologise. I returned to work only to find it happening again two weeks later. I resigned in March of 1999 and then took an overdose of medication that I had collected and hidden over several months. I took the pills before bedtime and my mother only realised that something was wrong during the early morning hours of the next day when she heard noises coming from my room. I had fallen off the bed when she found me and was semi-unconscious. She managed to wake me up before taking me to hospital. I only remember waking up the next afternoon in my own bed and feeling just fine. I was admitted for a third time after this incident.

Treatment once again consisted of medication and six sessions of electro convulsive treatment (ECT). The only difference I felt was side-effects from a change of medication. The doctor then changed my diagnosis to schizo-affective disorder, since I believed that I was not human and that I could control the speed of computers and the behaviour of people with my mind; that I could be programmed and trained to do anything in the world and that a crowd of people were constantly watching me from above. I was apparently also constantly speaking to someone called Mike, even though no one ever saw him. Three weeks later I re-joined society, but only managed for a few months before I had to be admitted again to receive another six ECT’s. I could not stay longer because our medical aid was depleted. I then agreed to be sent to a government psychiatric facility for further treatment.

(Journal entry: April, 2002 – recollections of an experience)

I am tired today. I want to go away from this place called earth. I don’t like people. I want to be alone with no one around me and no one to talk to. I wish I could go to a different planet with no human beings on it. Then there’ll be no one to do anything for.

I wish I was someone else; someone who felt like someone. I have stopped trying. What I do is not even good enough for myself, then how can it be good enough for anyone else? I have tried to any effort. I can never be up to standard...whatever that means. It is easier to separate myself from this hurt by not being with people anymore. I don't need people. I should quit mixing with humans then there'll be no standards to achieve and no failure to feel.

My Yellow File

(Journal entry: May, 2002 – recollection of an experience)

It is dark in the room. I can see a dim, blue light shining in underneath the door. My body is sweating...I'm shivering. I wish I could stop taking this medication.

I want to be normal, like they say the people outside these walls are. I want to find a little part in me that can stand as the foundation to build my house of sanity on. It's as if there are gaps or open spaces in me that need to be filled. I don't know what to put in these gaps. I wonder if other people also have gaps.

I feel like a machine being switched on and off through the power of treatment every day. No doubt everyone's trying to help me as best they can, but why is no one finding the problem. I'm sure there must be a problem somewhere in me, or else...could it be my fault? If I knew what the problem was I would surely tell, but I don't. I'm afraid. Why am I like this? Why do I have such gaps inside of me? How is it possible to ever communicate my internal chaos to anyone else?

I wish for the end of this; an end where I will be of better interest to those around me than a yellow file with my diagnosis in their office.

It was a big hospital with many wards. The food was nice; the staff was friendly and there was a big tree in front of my ward. The psychiatrist did not look at me while I told my story. He seemed busy and clever and in control of many things. I did not feel that he believed me. He was writing down so many things.

I was there for four and a half months during which I received psychological assessment, a full medical workup and another change of medication. After assessment and one month later I was considered to be “fit for therapy” and started seeing an intern clinical psychologist. The people were different there. Life felt slower than in the private clinics and

they seemed to have more time to help. They appeared genuine in their quest of finding out what the problem was, so that they could give it a name; so that it could explain what they were observing.

I wish I can write what I felt during that time, but the problem is that I cannot remember my feelings. I only remember the lady who came from another ward with her dentures in one hand while taking half of my banana as I was about to eat it. I remember the man who would walk in the ward with a sheet wrapped around him and trying to expose himself to the ladies, and I remember another guy trying to get his bar of soap and pants out of his locked suitcase. I also remember having to stay awake for 24 hours for an EEG (Electro-encephalography) and playing with Lego on the floor in the nurses' office to try and stay awake. I definitely remember the 21-kilograms that I gained after changing to different medication, and the horrible side effects of those; of not waking up during the night to go to the toilet; of regular blood tests; of not feeling able to keep my hands and legs still; of not being able to concentrate; of becoming a chain smoker; and of wondering about my reason for living after four months in that place.

(Journal entry: May, 2002 – a recollection of an experience)

I heard what she (psychiatrist) said to mom that day: that there's one of two roads for me; either long-term hospitalisation or medication for the rest of my life. I think I'm only beginning to understand those words now. I've been sitting in this hospital for four months already, and my thoughts are constantly wandering to a reason why I was born. Is this it? To sit in hospitals and do nothing more but smoke, eat, sit and think?

Could it be possible that there's a different hope...which I cannot see yet? Does anyone know of it? Can someone tell me about it...if it's there? Surely this cannot be it. There must be something more for me. Do you think God hears me? Do you think He can help?

A few weeks later I was discharged. Three days after I got home a middle-aged lady (I will call her 'A'.) and her brother knocked on our door. They had driven 13 hours to come and see me and were convinced that they needed to tell me something. She had heard of my problems from my aunt who lived in the same town as 'A'. I remember her sitting next to me on our bench outside, smoking with me, telling me that she was an architect, that her dad was a minister and that she had prayed for me over the last three months. While praying she felt

prompted to come and find me and tell me that I should not worry because there was hope for me; that Jesus Christ was my hope.

I did not listen. I was not interested in what she had to say, but there was something about her that made an impression on me; a feeling, I think; a weird feeling that I was not used to.

Love

(Journal entry: April 2002 – a recollection of an experience)

Who is this?

Where is this coming from? I don't know it...I've never felt this before. What is it? It's not above or beneath me; it's all around me, swallowing me. Should I trust it? Should I reach out and touch it? Why do I struggle to explain it? It's like I have no cabinet to file this in. I feel so small against it; my mind, my knowledge, so small. Does this have a name? And why is it here? What does it want with me?

There's a lady sitting next to me. She's been talking about many things tonight, but I'm not listening. This strange feeling is coming from her...I want to give it a name, but I'm too shy to use this word. It's difficult to say it; almost like a foreign language. I will quickly tell you, but then I'm going to be like a child and run away. Here it comes...love.

It was new to me, and I was trying to understand why it felt so strong, so honest and so unconditional. Even if I encountered it every day I would not have known what to do with the feeling it created in me. Was I supposed to have done something to receive it? Surely I was not worthy of it if I had not done anything to earn it? It was therefore not mine; it was possibly a mistake; it was probably meant for someone else. I would simply greet it like a stranger, invite it to my heart and wave a friendly goodbye.

(Journal entry: August, 2003)

'The office of my heart'

Good afternoon Love. I'm glad you could come. Please sit down for a while; I'll be with you in a second.

Am I correct to say that this is your first visit to the office of my heart? Then you will have to fill out this form. It's only some personal information that I need in order to open up a file for you.

Can you give me the full meaning of your name; your address—so I'll know where to find you next time; and then your date of existence—how long people have known about you. You may take a seat while completing this form, but before you do... tell me, have we not met before? Your eyes look so familiar. Or, it might be that you remind me of another friend of mine called 'Pleasure'.

Maybe we should get together some time. I would like to know more of you, because there's something about you that is very new to me. Well then, until we meet again...

'A' invited me to visit her and her husband in a small town in the Western Cape if I ever wanted to; that we would paint and enjoy ourselves. I did not answer her. She and her brother left that same evening. I liked her. I liked that she was so convinced of a way out for me. I liked that she drove *that* far to come and tell me that all was not lost, and that I was worth it for her. I liked that she believed in something and that she was so certain of this belief. And most of all, I liked what it felt like to be with her – warm, comfortable, and peaceful. I wanted more of that feeling. My heart felt hungry for it and seven months later I decided to go and search for it. I began to think of it as hope.

(Journal entry: August 2003)

Fear, how do I escape your claws? Who can tell me what to do? This cannot be the reason I've been put on earth – to endure everyday-torture from you. There must be something else; a different hope. I've never seen or felt hope, but somehow I seem able to believe in its existence. Do you think it might come to me some day? Can I meet with hope? I wonder...

How would it feel like to sit next to Hope on a bench, listening to its stories of how anything is possible if I would walk with it through this forest? How will Hope's face look like? Will it be so beautiful that I would want to sit with it all night long, listening to the most encouraging words I've ever heard? I wonder...

Will Hope tell me how to get rid of you, Fear? What if Hope invites me to live with it

for a while so I can get to know its ways and personality; what would it do to you, Fear? I wonder...

(Journal entry: March, 2003)

Fear,

*You keep me from climbing the mountains
You lead me away from drinking of fountains
You cover my eyes so I cannot see
the loveliness of life there is for me.*

*What place can hide me from you?
How does one escape your grip, your hold?*

*Your breath is cold
Your eyes have no tears
You are without heart
May I call you death, Fear?*

I convinced my parents that the only hope for change in my life was to go and visit ‘A’, because somehow I thought that she could give me answers. So, they eventually agreed to buy me a bus ticket. I wanted to feel what I felt from ‘A’ before; I wanted the hope and certainty that she seemed to have. I wanted to know why she was able to believe something different about my life and my problems.

Hope

It was January of 2000 when I arrived in the small town in the Western Cape. I was to live with my aunt for a few days until ‘A’ and her husband came back from holiday. When they finally arrived I was invited to stay in their home for a few days. During this time ‘A’ introduced me to another lady, ‘C’, who was the founder of a counselling ministry in town. ‘C’ was a retired General Practitioner who decided to start a Christian ministry that would help people with psychological difficulties through prayer and deliverance. This ministry believed that most psychological and psychiatric problems were a result of sin in one’s life, and that sin often opened the door to evil spirits and strongholds within the person’s life. Their belief around my case was exactly this; that I was possessed by demons.

On the first day I met with ‘C’, she asked whether she could pray for me. I was irritated by her from the moment I saw her; an elderly lady with glasses who spoke too softly and had too much money and probably had a ‘perfect’ life with no problems. I sat with her so she could do her praying thing, but refused to close my eyes. My thoughts were: who the heck are you and what on earth do you think you can help me with? I do not remember what she prayed about, but I remember that my whole body began to feel different. My mind was suddenly quiet for the first time in years; no sound of my own voice telling me how bad I was, how I should behave, or how I did not belong in the world; just quiet. I did not want to move for fear of chasing the feeling away. After a while I started telling ‘A’ what I was feeling. ‘C’ then said that it was the presence of God. I ignored her, because that was not what I wanted to hear. It was too good to be true, and she was too perfect.

A few minutes later the feeling was gone and my mind was noisy again. My first question to them was: How can I get more of this feeling? ‘C’ said that I would have to choose to give my reason for living over to Jesus Christ and live according to the Bible. I did not know what this meant, but it was not as if there was really any other option for me. The only other choice was repeated hospitalisations and medication for the rest of my life (as one psychiatrist proposed). No, I wanted to fix my problems; I wanted to be good and acceptable and please my parents; I wanted their approval; I wanted to be someone; I wanted to hear that I was okay and that I was able to achieve at least something; I wanted to be human, like other people in the world; I wanted to be part of the norm-for-all...the normal.

I went back home to get more clothes and once again convince my parents that I had to go back because there was something that could help me. I then continued to live with ‘A’ and her husband for three weeks. The atmosphere in their home was somewhat peaceful and non-judgemental. While living there I experienced a different home from what I was used to and began to realise that nothing really happened to a person if they left the shampoo bottle open, or if they only washed the dishes the next day. For the first time I met with a certain kind of freedom, joy and an unconditional acceptance of who I was and not what I did. They listened, spent time with me, and seemed able to believe that there was hope for me; that recovery was possible; that I needed a different understanding to my struggling condition.

‘C’s ministry consisted of a team of two other people – a married couple with two children. I was introduced to them and then they explained the plan: That I should attend sessions with them every day so that they could pray over me. I trusted that they knew what

they were doing, and I was desperate. After a week of praying over me and listening to parts of my life story they decided to start with delivering me from evil spirits. Their belief was that my psychological difficulties were as a result of demonic activity, which had ‘entered’ me through the 14 years of karate training that I did. I had never heard such reasoning before and I did not know what to think of it, but I decided to believe them. I had ‘evil’ in me, I was ‘dirty’, full of ‘bad’ and needed ‘fixing’.

It was eight weeks of exorcism; eight weeks of listening to yet another name of another demon that needed to be “chased out” of me; of wondering when I would be “clean” inside; of feeling more guilty because it seemed I had so much evil in me; of believing that evil did not want to leave me because I did not have enough faith. After a few days of ‘A’ driving me there and back, the team decided it would be best for me to move in with the couple from the ministry. I moved in with them and the ‘therapeutic ministry’ continued as my psychiatric medication was tapered to a lower dose until it was eventually stopped.

I was treated like their daughter and experienced a different kind of family life while living in their home. One in which the father was involved and interested in his daughters’ lives and the mother wanted to know how they were doing. If their child was not feeling well they were able to recognise it and respond to it. It was a family where conflict was heard and seen and resolved when possible and where you were allowed to have an opinion. We had meals together, watched television, had Bible study sessions, went to watch their daughter take part in athletics, went to the shops and I even joined them as support on their road running training days.

In between the experience of family life there was also the experience of “receiving ministry”, “setting Jolene free” and trying to understand why I had to burn and destroy all my medals, South African championship photos and gear from my many years of practicing martial arts as a sport. It used to be something that I was very proud of. I received my second-grade black belt in 1998 and took part in various national and international championships. The thought of my achievements would often be the one thing that prevented me from attempting suicide, as it would trigger thoughts like: this is something that I can do; maybe this is part of the reason why I was born.

I continued to believe that they knew something about hope and that I would be ‘healed’ of my ‘illness’ if only all the evil spirits would leave me. This was why I then decided to try my best to help them; to listen carefully as they spoke to these evil things in me

and to hopefully help it to go away by concentrating really hard. But, these sessions became longer and more tiring and there was always still more to be done (as they believed). At times I became too tired and would pretend that something had ‘left’ me so that we could be done for the day. I waited for the promised feeling of freedom to appear, but it did not come. The only thing that did happen was that I was feeling a lot more. This was more or less four weeks after I stopped taking medication that it felt as if someone had switched on my feelings and senses. It was the first time in five years that I was without a mood stabiliser or anti-psychotic drug.

When their 11-year old daughter mentioned that I should be baptised in the Holy Spirit, there were more things that started happening. After I was baptised the sessions of exorcism still continued, but at night I began to dream. I dreamed about God and angels and the sea and dark spirits wanting to take me away to a place where I heard voices screaming. It ranged from extreme fear to immense peace. When I woke up in the mornings I tried to read The Bible and often hoped to find explanations to these dreams, but I found nothing. The dreams did not stop and mostly happened before I fell asleep. I would be in a dream, yet recognise the room in the background as my eyes were still open, but I could not move my body or escape the dream. During an afternoon nap one day, I dreamed that something walked towards my bed and climbed onto my back, pushing down on me into the mattress.

On another occasion I heard strange noises in my dream and even though it made me extremely afraid, I could not get it to go away. On one particular evening it felt as though I was being lifted off my bed and taken somewhere by shadows next to my bed that were screaming too loud. As this was happening I could only speak one word in my mind. I did not plan to think of it, I only said a word that felt strong enough: Jesus. After I had said it the shadows disappeared immediately and there was silence. I saw the outline of a face in front of me and there were fingers flaking through my fingers. The face was smiling and I felt safer than I had ever felt before. This only lasted a few seconds before the shadows returned. This time they took me further away from the room before I could say the word *Jesus*. They went away again and I saw the face. This happened three times in one evening before I was able to move my body and wake myself up. I had never been so afraid, yet never had such certainty that nothing could harm me if I spoke that word.

I started telling the couple I was living with about these dreams, because I wanted to know what was happening to me. They did not really have an answer, but asked me to please

not share such things again since I was scaring their children. I was so sorry... I then stopped speaking about it to people and started speaking about it to God in my journals. God was the first one who heard my thoughts, opinions and my voice; and I had become less afraid of Him. Some of the things that I dreamed about were different from what 'C' and her ministry were telling me. The content of the dreams helped me to understand that I did not need to be clean from evil or perfect before I would be acceptable to God, or before He would help me. I also realised that dark spirits cannot exist where God's spirit is, and so I thought that I needed to get more of God in me so that the evil would go away.

After two months of "deliverance from evil" I took the courage to confront 'C', telling her that I just played along most of the times and that I had never felt anything leaving me; that I still felt the same as before. Her answer was that another demon was speaking through me and that it was telling this lie so that it would not be chased out of me. The next day a discussion took place between the ministry team members, but ended in conflict as 'A' was saying that I did not need more deliverance and 'C' was saying that I did. The decision was made for me to leave the couple's house and live on my own in a bachelor's flat two blocks away. A few days later I began to realise that they were slowly distancing themselves from me, but 'A' continued to support me as best she could.

I was 21 years old and living on my own for the first time. I wanted to tell someone of what had happened to me, but did not know who to trust or how to tell them about it. It felt as though it was my fault that things had gone wrong and so I engaged in self-harming behaviour once again...to punish myself; to fix me. I smoked a lot and I slept even more and eventually took on a job at the only video shop in town. Even though I was struggling emotionally and financially, I had become fascinated by the conversations I felt I was having with God in my journals. I asked questions and shared my feelings and read scriptures that seemed as though it was teaching me about life; about how to respond to people who hurt you; what to do when there is too much gossip around you; how to survive when people reject you for reasons you do not understand; what to do when you are alone and afraid; how to think about yourself as a unique person; and what your mission in life should be.

The video shop was a sit-and-wait-until-the-shift-ends kind of job, which gave me time to write, read, cry and think. I used to be afraid of reading, because I had never been able to finish reading any book before; I thought I was not able. So, reading different books in the Bible was a new step for me. Three months later I quit the job and moved next door to

work at a clothing store where I continued to write and read. Two months later I also moved into an old two-bedroom house that was home to a multitude of cockroach families under the floor boards. I only owned a bed and a hi-fi, and my bed was parked in the middle of the room where no cockroach could fall on me during the night. Yes, it was that bad!

As I began to learn more about God through the Bible and from a few gospel songs I had found on a CD, I started feeling that I did not want to destroy my body so much anymore. I had read that my body was the temple of God that needed to be kept holy, and so I decided to smoke less until one evening when I prayed to God to help me to stop. A few days later I started feeling nauseous whenever I tried smoking. It made me feel so sick that I stopped smoking from the fear of feeling sick.

I eventually lived in the small town for the whole of the year 2000 and during this time I went through several experiences that forced me to think certain things about people and life. One such experience was when ‘C’ and the couple from the ministry started to ignore me after I decided to agree with ‘A’ to not continue with deliverance sessions. Since they were in conflict among themselves over my case, they eventually concluded that the conflict between them was as a result of their contact with me and that I was a demonic attack on their ministry. Upon hearing this it gave me even more reason to believe that I was never supposed to be born and that I was the problem.

It made me more afraid to trust people and I felt alone within the situation; as if the whole human race was impossible for me to connect with and as if I was just never meant to mix with people. These were my thoughts and they were even stronger than before; the difference was my conversations with God. Even though people had failed me terribly and vice-versa, there was still the thought of a God who was hearing my heart, my tears and my confusion through my writings. I did not feel I could talk to people, because I did not know how to tell anyone of the demons that were supposedly living in me and causing trouble. But, I felt that I could tell God, because it seemed as though He was on my side.

Another experience during that year was with ‘A’s husband who decided to confront me on a specific Sunday while I was alone with him at his office about my attitude of not trying hard enough to not listen to the “demons” in me. I heard that I was not making use of opportunities where people were trying to help me and that it would be my own foolishness if I did not decide to change my attitude from depression to appreciation; that I could pack my things and leave if I did not start changing, and that ‘A’ felt the same about all of what he was

telling me. I did not expect such words and it came as a shock to me. As I was listening to him I started hearing sizzling sounds in my ears and felt pins and needles all over my body. It was as if my ears could not hear anymore and as if fear was closing my throat. It did not feel as though I was in the room anymore even though I was still sitting in front of him. I did not know how to defend myself with words and I simply nodded and agreed that he was speaking the truth and that the problem was with me, because I needed to smile more; I needed to talk more; I needed to pretend as if life was good and I needed to act as if he was not hurting me...

After that conversation I walked home and felt as though all thoughts had left my mind. Everything was silent and I could not speak. I sat in my room for two days searching for stories in the Bible that could help to explain what just happened. The only comfort I found was from a song in which the artist was saying how special we all are to God. Even though I did not feel special, I could not stop listening to it. After that day I made the decision to pretend that I was happy, so that no one could hurt me. I became the friendly, helpful, and quiet person who did not cause trouble; the one for whom nothing ever really went wrong in life; the one who just needed to get her act together; the one whom no one needed to worry about anymore; the one who could change, if only she would try.

(Journal entry: September, 2000)

I am looking for my cupboard; I want to climb in and close the door. I do not want to see faces or hear voices. My reason now is to escape and to hide. I want to talk to people, but I don't know how and with whom. I can speak to God: I'm afraid Lord, please don't let go of my hand. Hold it tight.

(Journal entry: December, 2001)

Where is my place, Lord? Where should I go to find rest? Who will put their arms around me and who will whisper in my ear that everything's going to be fine? Who will sit and listen to all I have to say; all my pain, my sorrow and my grief? Who will see every single tear that I cry and who can light up my heart again?

I believe You will.

Something New

My pretence made everyone think that I was happy and content. The fact is that I only felt more distant. I was still engaging in self-harm and still believed that I was one big mistake on two legs. The only difference was that I was sharing my thoughts and feelings with God through writing and prayers.

I am aware that some readers may want to disagree with me over the existence of God and whether I was not simply experiencing minor psychotic episodes as I was ‘hearing God speak’ through my writings, or having visual experiences of shadows moving me around in dreams while I was still awake. One can always debate these issues and I am sure that there will be many opinions on this, but this is not my reason for sharing my story. I can only restate that this narrative is *my* interpretation of experiences and that I can only give an honest account if I share it as I experienced it. Having said that, I do wonder why I feel the need to include this comment. It probably has to do with previous experiences I have had with people who were sceptical or dismissive of my interpretation of these experiences. Every person has a right to an opinion and I am simply telling my story.

In October of 2000 I resigned from the clothing store and was planning on going back home at the end of November. I had given notice for my lease and had no place to stay for the last few weeks. It was during this time that a lady, ‘H’, invited me to live with them. ‘H’ used to be a customer at the video shop. She was married to a local wine farmer and mother to three boys and one girl. She enjoyed talking about God and faith and was of course fascinated by the reason why I left the city to come and live in this small Western Cape town. The two weeks that I stayed with them was yet another experience that contributed to my understanding of what ‘family’ means. I saw a father who had a relationship with each of his sons and I saw a mother who knew her children well enough to know what they needed before they needed it; I saw mature parents who were able to respond to their children’s needs and I often had the privilege of being part of this process and not only witnessing it.

Towards the end of my stay I began to think of taking up the idea that I heard a few weeks earlier from a lady who visited from Cape Town – joining the missionary organisation called YWAM (Youth With A Mission). I had no idea what it involved, but I also had no idea what to do with my life. So, this seemed good enough. I went home to my parents over December of 2000, and returned to the Western Cape in June of 2001 to enrol in a Discipleship Training School at YWAM for three months.

The school consisted of 42 students who took part in six weeks of teachings on the character of God, the Holy Spirit, church and missions, relationships and sexuality, the family, and more; followed by six weeks of outreach into a community. There were students from Denmark, Holland, Nigeria, Congo, Brazil, Korea and South Africans from various provinces. There were also other schools running on the missionary base: School of Biblical Studies, School of Arts, etc. Some students were busy with their degree (since YWAM has a university) and others were there for purpose of growing in their understanding of God. This was one of the 1100 missionary bases in over 180 countries where people from different cultures and denominations were coming together to grow spiritually through serving and learning. After class everyone had chores that mostly involved cooking or cleaning for about 140 people. We slept in dormitories that were once part of wards of an old hospital.

Most of my experiences with YWAM involved learning about being in relationships with people. It was a time during which I was exposed to community living, which often forced me into situations where I began to learn about communicating my needs, facing interpersonal conflict, the act of confronting another person, and allowing myself to be vulnerable in the presence of another when sharing my feelings. My conversations with God continued to help me during these times and my journals became my confidential and safe space where I could return every time the world felt too overwhelming to deal with.

I continued to be part of YWAM for two years altogether and had the privilege of travelling to different countries where several key people crossed my way. One such person was an American lady who was Dean of the School of Communication and had worked as an editor. She encouraged me to attend an Author's Training School (ATS) in 2002 with YWAM's university, since she believed that my life's story needed to be published. While attending this school I met two young American ladies who became like sisters to me. They allowed and encouraged me to dream, to become aware of my talents and possibilities for my future.

(Journal entry: June, 2002)

It costs nothing to dream...I know, but I grew up without ever feeling free enough to dream. Dreams, for me, were just not possible. It's your imagination taking you places; why then even waste your time imagining it if it's not real?

A man once told me: Hold on to your dreams, don't ever let go of them. I'm only beginning to realise what he said. It's the most difficult thing to follow your dreams in today's world. I think...it's the most difficult thing to be alone.

Another key person that I met was a counsellor on the base who was also doing the ATS school. She and her husband ran a therapeutic living program at their home. She approached me one day after hearing part of my history and began to talk to me about 'dissociative identity disorder' and the concept of psychological integration. I did not understand what she was saying, but I liked one thing that she said: you need to make friends with your inner parts that feel hurt, distant and afraid. A few weeks later I started writing more elaborately about the way in which I experienced my inner Self. It was an attempt to get to know 'me', (since I did not know 'me'); an attempt to "make friends" with 'me'. The result was a more allegorical style of writing in my journals at times, and the start of a story called *My Woodland*.

My Woodland was an attempt to give a voice to the parts in me that had been mute, distant and disconnected for most of my life. My feelings became characters and I was a cabin in the woods. The trees hindered the sun from shining through so that it was constantly cold and dark in my woods – representing my darkness, my fear, my loneliness, my depression. My feelings were "friends" living with me in the cabin and following me wherever I went. No person had access to my cabin because I did not know how to tell them where it was, and no one knew that I lived in the woods. I had a sense that there was something beyond my woods; something greater and wiser; something that could see and know more than I could; something that could help me to escape my cabin and my woods; something that would introduce me to a different world where there was warmth and hope. In *My Woodland* I believed that the sun had these powers, but that I could not see it because the trees were too dense. The sun represented my experience with God (through dreams and through people). I did not know how to get to the sun, but I hoped that it would find me.

(Journal entries during 2004)

No one ever comes to stay in my house. I only have the friends in my cabin (Loneliness, Fear, Death, Anger, Depression, Failure and Perfection); no world-lings. Those from the world wouldn't understand. They would come to look...and leave. They would not know how to help and I cannot explain to them what kind of help I need. I can only show what I have – a forest. My Woodland makes people afraid of me. They do not understand it so

then they usually leave.

...I wish I had a different friend than Fear. I've heard that a perfect friend could never be found in this forest, but what if it's a lie? Imagine a friend who'd know everything about me before I would even say a word. Imagine one who could guide me through life with such wisdom and care that Death becomes someone I despise. Imagine one who is so perfect that I would never need any other friend...imagine.

...I wish I was different. I wish I didn't have a cabin in my Woodland...and I wish there was no Woodland. Why am I like this? Why are things so difficult for me? Do you think there's someone who can tell me? I hope so. I wish I can meet them.

...I want to know where I belong. Where do I come from? Why was Fear the first friend that I met when I entered this world? How different would it have been if Love was the first one I met? Would I have understood Love? Would the filing cabinet in my heart's office have contained the file named, Love? Would I have known where to find it? I wish I knew..

I had many new experiences while being at YWAM. I flew in an aeroplane for the first time, visited different countries for the first time, finished reading the first book in my life, attended teachings and seminars on various subjects regarding personal growth from a Christian perspective, realised that I love music and words, saw Bill Gates' house, went to my first baseball game in San Diego, met and spent a weekend with two world famous authors, became part of a dance team for a few months, worked at the communications office of YWAM's university and much, much more.

These experiences helped me become brave enough to confront many fears that I struggled with. Fears that were rooted in certain beliefs were 'proved' wrong as I ventured into allowing different experiences to change these beliefs. It helped me grow in knowledge about Self, others, life and the world; to taste the possibility of learning, growing, being and becoming. It allowed me to discover my Self in more ways than before and to risk facing my fears with the belief that "I will be okay", because God was with me. This was the belief that made me feel brave enough, worthy, and more human. I was beginning to learn my reason for being alive, and also *what it means* to be alive.

Home

Towards the end of 2003 I returned home and I decided that I wanted to earn my own income. I was tired of depending on my dad or donations for survival. Three months later I started working part-time at a local Christian bookshop while living with my parents.

It was not easy to be home again and I behaved somewhat differently than before. For the first time I was beginning to say no to things that I did not want or did not like. This caused conflict between us, but I was determined to not deny what I had learned about myself up till then – that there *is* a reason for me, that I *may* dream, that I *do* have the ability to be good at some things, that I *can* try and that mistakes are not the end of the world. To a degree I was able to hold on to these beliefs and to not let go of my dreams, but the loneliness of not being within a community of other believers (as YWAM was) was the most difficult to get used to. I joined a church, but it was not the same.

(Journal entry: January, 2004)

I am somewhere. It's not a space; that's too specific. Now and then I make contact with the world. I am afraid...what will happen to me in future?

A few months later I met a German lady who used to be in YWAM. She came into the book store looking for a specific book. Through our conversation I learned that she was the web co-ordinator of YWAM Africa and that the regional director had given her my name a few weeks earlier, asking her to make contact with me and find out how I was doing. What a relief! For the first time it felt as though I was not forgotten. Someone somewhere had thought about me and I was convinced that this was God's way of looking after me.

However, I was still struggling to be in the presence of my parents and I still yearned to be relieved from life, which often caused me to 'escape' into my own fantasies and day dreams of places where things were different.

(Journal entry: August, 2004)

I like being here...why do I need to be part of the real world? When I am with Imagination no human can find me and days are as long as I want them to be. No one can hurt me here; there is not even a door for other people to knock on. My imaginary world brings me joy. It knows no limit to where I can go. I don't like Reality; it's not comfortable to be with and it always pushes me into a corner. It is just too heavy to carry. I was not made for it.

At the bookshop we were expected to read some of the books so that we could assist customers if they were looking for books on specific subjects. This was how my interest in the psychology of people began to grow. I was reading one book after the other and could not wait for the next revelation or piece of information that would suggest one more thing about how it all went wrong for me; how it can go wrong for any person. It fascinated me and it helped me with my process of trying to make sense of my life. Sometimes I could not stop crying and other times I was angry for weeks. In 2005 I was given a full-time position at the bookshop and began to study part-time at a private institute for a Bachelor's Degree in psychology.

At the end of 2006 I resigned and continued with studying full-time. Bit by bit I was able to pass the subjects and little by little I began to believe that I was mentally capable of finishing a degree. It was not easy. I was still engaging in self-harming behaviour and often cried so much that I could not fall asleep. My parents did not know; they thought I was doing well and that all my problems had 'disappeared'. But I realised I was struggling too much and my one wish was to tell someone. At the end of 2006 I met this someone; she was a clinical psychologist who believed with me that even more change was possible. She eventually assisted me on my journey to further recovery for seven years in therapy.

In 2008 my desire to hurt or harm myself began to fade. I was finding it more difficult to even imagine hurting my body and I could not ignore pain anymore (which was different than before). I did not want to do it anymore and felt to rather protect myself than harm myself. I was finding it more rewarding to tell someone of my difficulties, which was what psychotherapy assisted me with. I experienced her (the therapist) as someone who was genuinely interested to hear me, and who helped me to find words for what I struggled to say. She also helped me to understand that families function as systems and that all members in a family contribute to how the system functions. This made me realise that I did not need to be the only 'problem' that needed 'fixing', but that other members were also responsible for the 'health' or 'illness' of a family system. Another relief!

An Ending for Today

I want to end my story with my decision to study psychology, or maybe with the day that I saw my name on the shortlist of candidates chosen for a master's degree in clinical psychology. Yes, let me end it there so that you may walk away from this story remembering the positive note on which it ended. This is not to say that my story does not have a hopeful

ending, but as I am approaching the stage where I need to end off this narrative I am becoming aware of my need to convince you, as reader, that I am ‘okay’. This suggests that I might be afraid of something and I am interested to know what it is.

Of course it is true that I have shared immensely personal information through telling my story and even though I can choose what to tell, it still leaves me in a vulnerable position where I do not have control over what you, as reader, will do with the information that you now have about me. So, it makes sense that I would want to convince you that things were not really that bad in order to prevent you from thinking that I am ‘not okay’, or that I am still ‘ill’; still ‘the patient’...still part of ‘them’. These are my fears; the fear of not being accepted as human being, the fear of being different and the fear of standing alone...but, do we not all struggle through these? I realise that it does not really matter where I choose to end my story on paper, but rather that I share with you my experience of change as a lifelong, constant process that never really ends. My story has not ended and I have not ‘arrived’.

I would be lying if I told you that my life has changed to the point where I do not struggle with anything anymore (I would be lying about the psychological complexity of every human being and the lifelong journey, lifestyle changes and constant psychological awareness that it takes to function in life). At times I am still aware of a deep wish to have lived a different life; almost like a constant wish to go to the shop and buy a different history. Imagine that... I can tell you now that I would want to buy a more ‘ordinary’ history; one that is more usual than unusual.

I do still have moments when I have to struggle through a very low mood or try to contain my seemingly unbearable anxiety. I have also had moments when it felt as though I could not remember my reason for life anymore, or times when it felt as though I was not able to tolerate the responsibilities or distress that life can throw at me. During such times I have to stop and realise where I am while figuring out why I am responding this or that way. I have to constantly question my thoughts and inner beliefs while actively engaging with people in an attempt to clarify, understand and possibly challenge my perceptions of what I experience to be real; remembering that I am allowed to be. It is never easy, but faith, hope and joy have certainly entered the picture.

I am often afraid to tell my story; afraid of feeling rejected and not by one or two people, but by society. I am afraid of hearing those words again: “you’re in remission and that is why you are doing better”. In other words, I am still ‘ill’; I am only ‘less ill’. I am

afraid of believing that I can never escape this ‘illness’ and that I can only enter different stages of it. But, this is where I am free to choose. I will be victim to these thoughts and fears as long as I try to reason only from a medical framework. And no, I am not denying the importance of medication, hospitalisation or the diagnostic system. I am simply sharing my experience and this is simply my interpretation. The only way I can think and live differently is if I think about my Self from a different perspective; and so, I chose to adopt a Christian perspective. It has worked for me in my search for understanding my Self, my human condition, people and the world. It has left me with a sense of hope rather than being thought of as ‘ill’. It has enabled me to come into contact with families and communities who allowed for helpful and growing experiences.

(Journal entry: 2005)

Have I mentioned that I wonder what the Land of Sun will be like? I long for it every day...to be with Him; to feel only the Sun.

Have I also mentioned that I am actually a child? I do have a side that can do grown-up things, but my foundation is that of a child. I can go far with Imagination...she is a very good friend of mine...of every child. But, some children never leave her hand. She seems to be their only escape, and after a while they don’t visit her anymore; they go and live with her. Have you heard of this? Have you seen this?

I thought it was possible to find my own way out of the woods. Or no; I thought that Faith, Hope and Love would lead me out; out and away forever! But, it is not so.

I thought we would walk away and never see or hear or feel my cabin again...but, it is different. I thought that we would run and that freedom would forever be the only air to breathe; that the cabin would be left behind; that it would never have to be part of my thoughts again; that Destruction, Loneliness, Depression, Anger and Death would only be a dream; that my life with these ‘friends’ never really happened and that this is how it was supposed to be like from the beginning...but, it seems I was wrong.

I thought that Faith, Hope and Love (the three) would show me the road out of my woodland; out of ‘me’, and that everything would be different. That everything would be better and maybe almost perfect. I thought that someone made a mistake, or rather, that I (woodland) was a mistake. That the three had finally come to fix me by taking me out of woodland and leading me to the Land of Sun where there is warmth and flowers. But, it

seems I have been mistaken, because we are still standing in woodland and I can still see my cabin. I am once again standing in front of my cabin; in front of my Self.

I had a thought just now: that Love will never exist and that Faith only exists if I work very hard at it. But...it is different. It is all different. Everything that I thought and imagined is now different. I thought that change and recovery meant to leave my woodland and that the change would be so remarkable that no one would have thought...even me...that I was who I once was; that I was finally able to run away from my Self and be a changed person. In fact, that I had become the person I thought everyone wanted me to be.

But now I see. We have never left 'me', because I'm still standing in front of my cabin; my Self. The journey showed me the size of my woodland with all its beautiful parts, its brave and fearful parts, and parts I never knew I had. I learned about my seasons, my plants, my growth, my life and my death. I was made aware of the erosion, draughts, rains, and even the rainbows that sometimes come.

I was looking forward to the better place; the better land that I had envisioned, but we did not go anywhere and we have only come to stand in front of my cabin again...the one I wanted to run away from. Why?

The only logical answer I can think of is that this is how it was supposed to be like; that my mind went too far ahead and created everything to be different instead of realising what is here; that I was never supposed to be different or perfect; that I was the right one from the beginning and not the wrong one; that no mistake was ever made with who I am. Because, if this was not true, the journey would have taken me elsewhere – which I do not intend to think upon; I think I have done enough of that now.

CHAPTER 4

CONVERSATIONS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGE

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

(Eliot, 1942)

The focus of this chapter will be on exploring and interpreting the occurrence of psychological change in my story as it is written in “Chapter 3”. The aim is to elicit conversations and even discussions about subjects that concern the nature of the psychological change that occurred, as well as influencing aspects (contextual and intrapersonal) that could have contributed to this change in my life.

My intention is to not only reflect upon my own preconceived ideas regarding the change that happened, but also to invite authors and theorists from relevant literature to contribute their opinions. This will potentially lead to new ways of understanding; new intelligibilities, as Gergen (as cited in Kelly, 2006) proposes. In essence I will be writing a story about my story (Nel, 2006), since this chapter is a continuation of the interpretative process that already started with the account of my experiences in previous chapters.

I do find it challenging to imagine *how* I will ‘facilitate’ the interpretations and conversations throughout this chapter, and the truth is that I do share some of Nel’s (2006) experience as she was writing up her autoethnography – *fear*. It feels as if I am venturing into the unknown with only a torch and a vague idea of which direction I should take, and as I meet and learn new understandings from fellow travellers (from literature) I might have to change course a few times. Wolcott’s (2001) advice to the budding researcher who finds it difficult to start with the writing process is to just begin with how things presently stand. This is what I will self-consciously attempt.

Wolcott (2001) further suggests that the researcher’s earlier writings on sections of their study can be of tremendous use during later stages of the research, since these writings

could serve as a baseline for one's current inquiry. My previous 'edition' of this specific chapter was an account of what I expected to discover from my story; what *I* believed were influences to psychological change; my preconceived opinions about change in my narrative. It is therefore a written record of certain biases and assumptions that could "...otherwise prove conveniently flexible and accommodating were they to remain only as abstractions." (Wolcott, 2001, p. 24). It is also a systemic inventory of what I already know and it is from here that I want to continue the conversations on psychological change.

The Story of Being a Child

My story starts with a description of my experience of childhood and family life. It is an introduction to the cultural discourses, personal beliefs, unspoken family rules, and unmet needs that I battled with. The purpose of sharing this part of my story is not to explain how my problems developed, but rather to share my sense of who I was at the time so that readers could have a starting point from which to recognise psychological change later in the story. It is for this reason that I would like to explore these inner 'battles' in more detail as it may introduce the reader to the deeper dynamics of my understanding of the world.

The concept of discourse refers to a historically, socially, institutionally specific structure of statements, standards, and beliefs that are commonly shared in a society and nestled within institutions, social relations, and even texts (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Weingarten, 1995). Every family is part of a cultural and societal context, which surrounds the individual with discourses that influence their understanding of self, others, reality, success, goodness, and much more. In the same way my family environment exposed me to certain established unspoken rules and deeper beliefs that were part of the history of my culture and the society I lived in.

I grew up in a strict, conservative, Afrikaans-speaking home where one was mostly supposed to obey your parents whose rules and roles were strongly informed by an Afrikaans culture. To me this was a culture where men were the powerful ones and women were the obedient 'slaves'. Wives were supposed to submit to the authority of their husbands and children needed regular hidings if they were to be raised as decent, respectable human beings. If your children were well-behaved, fearing your authority, then you were a good parent and worthy of others' respect and admiration.

In my family a lot of emphasis was placed on 'laws' and 'rules' that were believed to

be Biblical. My understanding of what it meant to be ‘Christian’ and subsequently a ‘good person’ was to obey my parents at all times, to not show negative emotions towards them, to be ‘humble’ (which meant being quiet and submissive), to not even think of challenging my dad’s authority, to not steal, to not swear, to not murder, and to not think or talk about sex (as that would be potentially sinful).

“Home” and “family” therefore cultivated certain beliefs in me, which influenced my sense of self, of other people and of reality. Considering the beliefs I mention during the first part of my story it seems that these informed my understanding of the imperatives of how I was supposed to be in the world and what things were supposed to be valued in life: *Do not show emotions* – it is not safe nor good; *Do not explore the world and do not express yourself* – this would upset your parents; *Do not ask questions* – your curiosity is insignificant; *Be perfect* – then you will survive; *Being a child is wrong* – you are supposed to be an adult, able to do things right; *Your thoughts and feelings are not important* – only adults’ are; *The ultimate punishment will be from God* – suffering, hell and death; *Be here, but do not be anyone*; *Reject what you feel and listen to what you are told*.

It was from this psychological position that I tried to approach life, but as you, my reader, may have realised from my story, I found it difficult and even impossible to engage with life from such a position. I mostly approached people and situations from a fearful, anxious position and it almost felt as though I was lacking the ‘language’ to relate to the world around me – to communicate my needs, to ask for help, to express and share my feelings and to negotiate these processes within my Self. I do not think that I did not have the ability to engage with the world in such a way, but rather that these things were simply not allowed in our home and therefore did not offer me the chance to develop in these areas. I am not saying that my parents verbally told my sister and I not to share our thoughts or feelings, but you realised and learned over time that it was not emotionally safe to do so because “dad knows best and is always right”, “parents talk and children listen”, “who are you to think you have anything significant to say”, “you do not know what you’re talking about”; and if you dared to challenge these unspoken rules you immediately knew from experiencing dad’s words or the way he looked at you, that you should never try it again. His response generated extreme fear of not being enough, not having value and not being a person.

As I am writing about these deeper beliefs I am reminded of Laing’s (as cited in Langdridge, 2007) description of schizophrenic communication patterns in families and the

experience of children who are exposed to it. He noted that such communication patterns do not usually involve the child who is subject to outright neglect or other obvious trauma, but rather involve the child whose authenticity has been “suffocated” without the child’s awareness. It is a type of communication among the members of a family that eventually leaves the child without a “voice”, without opinion, without feelings, and without meaning. No matter what meaning she gives a situation, her feelings get stripped of validity; her actions stripped of its motives, intentions and consequences so that the situation is robbed of its meaning for her. She is then left mystified and alienated.

Lee (as cited in Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967) described it in more detail by explaining a typical pattern. The parent (in this case, the father) fails to register his child's view while the child does not register that her view has not been (or cannot be) registered. The parent often appears to not be influenced by the child's view, because he feels that it is uncomplimentary to him or that it does not fit his value system. The parent therefore insists that the child believes what he feels the child *should* believe. The child, in turn, fails to recognise this and thinks that her message has been understood and acts accordingly. In such a situation she is bound to be confused by the subsequent interaction and may feel as if she is continuously running into an invisible glass wall. This develops into a continuous sense of mystification and can lead to anxiety and eventually despair in the child. Ultimately she may feel that life just does not make sense. She does not realise that she does not feel recognised and affirmed in her experience of the world. This type of communication may interfere with the child's understanding of reality. Even though she does experience certain feelings and tries to attach meaning to the feelings and the event, this is indirectly discouraged by the parent who imposes onto the child what he thinks the child should be feeling or believing while, at the same time, the child's experience is not acknowledged.

I do wonder why I am so strongly drawn to these authors’ description and I think it might be that it succeeds in describing that which I was never able to name or talk about for many years. It was only in 2005 when I started seeing a clinical psychologist for therapy that I was made aware of the existence of such interactions and the psychological impact of this on me. I would want to share more about the growth I experienced from psychotherapy, but I realise that I am jumping ahead of the process now. Before I can tell you about the psychological change that I experienced during therapy when I could understand the family as a dynamic system, I first have to tell you about the changes that made it possible for me to

actively engage with and use the psychotherapeutic process in the first place.

I am beginning to realise that certain changes could only occur after certain other changes had happened. I therefore assume that there is an order to the process of psychological change in my life and that there was probably a reason for this. It would only make sense for me to respect this order during my exploration and to allow it to inform my understanding of the nature of psychological change.

For the purpose of this study the concept of psychological change will refer to the experience of change in feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Carey, et al., 2007); in other words, moments during which a person feels, thinks and/or behaves differently than before.

Becoming Desperate

The first significant experience that I can identify as being different from what it used to be, happened in 1999 when I was spending my fourth month as an inpatient at the government psychiatric facility (as described in “My Yellow File”). I call it “significant” because it was the first time that I can remember that I dared to challenge the direction my life had taken up until that moment, and I suspect it came as a result of a growing desperation for my life to be different.

My immediate interest right now is to know more about this desperation and my first question is *why* my questions about life’s meaning had become important enough to me at that specific moment? What was it that was forcing me to suddenly give more attention to existential questions? My hypothesis is that a few factors might have been influential.

These were that this was the first time that I had lived away from home for more than a month and my parents were not allowed to visit me at hospital during the first few weeks. After that they only came every second or third week since they did not have the means to visit more often. I was disappointed and felt rejected, but this might have been just what I needed – to realise that my parents were probably not going to help and support me in the way I expected and that I was actually on my own.

Towards the end of my admission I had also become tired of the quality of my life and the uncomfortable experiences I had to go through – being put on different medication that increased my appetite until I picked up a significant amount of weight within a four month period; not having the luxury or freedom to go out and watch a movie or not having

your own private space when you needed it; and not feeling that you are making any contribution to society. I felt insignificant and powerless.

I believe these are some of the experiences, which caused me to accept responsibility over the course my life was taking. Maybe it was my perception that no one else really concerned themselves by my fate. I know that this was once my wish – that people would worry, would constantly keep me in mind and concern themselves with how they could help (this made me feel special and needed, and to a degree, this way of thinking about myself had become part of who I thought I was supposed to be). Perhaps my parents were tired of being afraid that I would not be 'able' to do it 'well enough', because maybe they were actually doing everything for me and not allowing me to take responsibility; and maybe the time away from them was sufficient for me to feel as though they were not there anymore, and that I needed to take responsibility.

It just...happened. No one told me to do it. I just did it, because there was no one to do it *for* me.

I think that if a person was to tell me directly that I needed to take responsibility for my life, I would not have understood what they meant. Even if I knew what it meant, I might have felt extremely rejected since I would rather have interpreted it as: I have done something wrong; you do not like me; you do not care; I am worthless; I am useless.

It is Frankl (2004) who states that asking questions about life's meaning and reason is the beginning of taking responsibility for the course of your life, since it engages you into the process of growing towards actualising the potential meaning to your life. One specific question I began to ask during that time was why things were the way they were, and how things could change for me. I wanted to be someone, because I was beginning to imagine how people would probably conveniently forget about me if I kept on returning to psychiatric hospitals with more problems and going home with more pills. I wanted things to be different. I wanted to feel different.

Gianakis and Carey (2011) mention that the awareness of inner tension and the attempt to resolve this tension or conflict is central to the individual's experience of psychological change. It seems that my inner conflict consisted of feeling desperate for my experience of life to be different together with not knowing what to do to create this change.

Experiencing Something New

The next moment of change happened a few days after I was discharged from the government hospital and it involves the lady, ‘A’ (as mentioned towards the end of “My Yellow File”) who came to my house to talk to me. My experience with her was new to me. As described in the section “Love”, the feeling that I felt while sitting with her was not something that I had felt before and I was struggling to make sense of this emotion within me.

For the first time I received interest, attention and acceptance from someone who was not receiving anything for her effort. In fact, she was the one spending money and hours of driving to come and see me. If I think about it now then I would say that *this* was rather what I was struggling to make sense of: how am I worthy of someone’s effort and involvement if I had done nothing to receive it? And so, this was my first experience of learning about unconditional involvement from another person. It was also the first time that I became aware of the possibility of feeling (and maybe finding) something different than what I was used to feeling. And in a way this was teaching me something about hope.

It took a person’s involvement in my life to introduce me to *Possibility*; the possibility that there could be something more to life and people than what I had previously thought. My experience with ‘A’ gave me new ways to think about people and to consider the thought that there was more to life than what I had experienced at home.

My decision to go and visit her seven months later and my attempt to try and convince my parents that I needed to go took a tremendous amount of courage from me. I say this, because it was the first time in my life that I made a decision and fought for it. I used to be too afraid to go against my parents’ wishes, but in that moment my desire to find hope was greater than my fear of their response. They eventually agreed to let me go and it felt as though I had conquered something; achieved something. I had ‘achieved’ my own decision and it felt good. I was beginning to realise that nothing bad would happen to me if I dared to challenge my inner fear (fear of following my own decision; fear of challenging my dad’s opinion). This was my first move towards understanding the negative impact of fear on my life and it was only later that I started searching for ways to get rid of fear. This was different to my usual way of accepting fear as part of my ‘package of self’. I began to think that I do not have to accept fear as the only available option. There are other feelings available; other possibilities.

I knew, because I had felt it from someone else.

An ‘Other’ View of the Problem

My contact with ‘A’ and the ministry team was my first exposure to people who shared a different way of thinking about a person with ‘mental illness’ or ‘psychological problems’. They did not treat me as a ‘case’ with ‘symptoms’ who needed a ‘cocktail’ of different medication to become ‘stable’, which is more typical of the disease model (or medical model) to understanding mental health or illness (Walker, 2006; Williams, 2012). Instead, they were making sense of my condition from their framework - a Christian framework, which involved the belief that my psychological problems were as a result of demonic activity and I needed to be ‘cleansed’ of evil, because my symptoms were manifestations of evil spirits. The aim was to ‘remove’ the demons and ‘replace’ it with God’s Holy Spirit.

I am not sure which way of understanding was better or worse for me at that stage, but it does seem that both of these views had a significant impact on my ability to hope.

I listen to the discourse of ‘mental illness’ as Morkel (2007) describes it from her study on mental illness as a socially constructed term, and I wonder at the tremendous power that lies within its language; a power that seems to guide people into certain beliefs and behaviour. Let us listen to how Mead and MacNeil (as cited in Walker, 2006) describe it:

Recovery in mental health has most often been defined as a process by which people labelled with mental illness regain a sense of hope and move towards a life of their own choosing...what remains hidden is the extent to which people have gotten stuck in a medical interpretation of their experiences. With this stuckness comes a worldview in which one is constantly trying to deal with their perception of what’s wrong with them instead of what’s wrong with the situation. In other words, even if I have hope of moving into a better life, I have been taught to pay a lot of attention to my ‘symptoms’. This interpretation of my experiences leaves me constantly on guard for what might happen to me should I get ‘sick’. ...I find myself creating a life that is ultimately guided by something inherently wrong with me. With this understanding, I may continue to see myself as more fragile than most, and different than ‘normal’ people... (p. 83)

I find this to be an accurate description of my own drama of being diagnosed as

‘mentally ill’, of learning that I needed medication to treat my ‘illness’, ECT when medication was not quite effective and hospital admissions when I was ‘very ill’. I understood the Depression or the Schizo-affective disorder as something that I *had*. I had ‘contracted’ it somehow from having a genetic vulnerability, and it was *in* my body in the form of a ‘chemical imbalance’. In short, my understanding was that I was doomed. This was my destiny. I was the lucky winner of something that no one could fix because the doctors said that I would have to use medication for the rest of my life, since the chemicals in my brain would not allow me a functional life if I did not. I believed them because I thought that they were clever; they had money; and they were powerful adults who knew a lot.

One could argue that receiving a name for what you have been struggling with for so long can bring some relief, because now you know; now there is a disorder to blame it on, which means that you can relax now because it is not your fault...it is the ‘illness’. But, what about the effect of believing a scientific explanation to mental illness; one that says that I am suffering from a medical condition and/or psychological problem; what does this do to my concept of self, my sense of control, or the meaning that I attach to life?

Morkel’s (2007) interpretation on the scientific discourse of mental illness sheds light on the impact of this discourse on the beliefs and behaviour of the individual. Some of the social beliefs that she uncovered in her study are: that those with a mental disorder are considered inherently defective; those without a mental illness are the healthy ones; my chemical imbalance causes me to behave differently; I have very little power to control my life and experiences, but medication can control this; I have a chronic problem that will not go away, so I need to manage it with medication; if I stop taking the medication then I will relapse into the illness again; doctors and psychologists are the experts who have the relevant knowledge about this medical condition I have; I am the object of treatment.

Here I would like to include a description of my experience as I explained it in 2011 in my research notes that seem to support Morkel’s (2007) findings:

During my time as a patient in the psychiatric hospitals, I believed that I was wrong and they (the psychiatrists, nurses and psychologists) were right; I was ill and they were not; I was lower and they were higher; I knew nothing and they were the experts; I was standing still and they were moving forward; I stayed in hospital while they went home; we were different. My conclusion was that they were more human than I was. I felt unable to fit myself into the societal discourse of what it meant to be

mentally healthy.

Reading through Morkel's (2007) and my own interpretations makes me aware of how this must have formed part of my identity during the time in my life when I only had this framework from which to understand my problems. This influenced my ideas of my abilities (mentally and physically) by thinking of myself as not able to do many things because of my 'mental illness'. I also see it as influential to my understanding of my past (that I was genetically predisposed – so, I cannot do much about my problems), of my present (I have chemical imbalances – I have to depend on medication) and on my view of the future (that there are no possibilities for recovery or even healing, but rather options of coping).

It seems clear that the discourse of the medical model greatly impacted on my view of self and the world as well as the way that I approached life. What then, was the result of being introduced to a Christian framework of understanding? In what way did it foster change for me? My hypothesis is that the change that occurred involved my realisation that there was another way of understanding my problems. I started believing that change was possible, because I heard 'A' speak about "healing", "freedom", "growth" and "hope" for the person who was caught up in loneliness, sadness, bitterness, darkness and confusion. I heard her giving explanations to the reasons for my problems. I also heard the possibility of solutions to these problems and of becoming a changed person with a hopeful future. I saw how certain they were that there was hope for me and it convinced me that it must be true, that there was hope. At the same time it also sounded like a foreign language in a far-away country and I had no idea how this could work, but I was hungry for change and I was willing to anticipate it.

At this stage I am once again struck by the realisation of the powerful effect that discourse can have on a person's ability to hope, and its influence on the meaning that one may attach to your existence. The role that language plays in the establishment and maintenance of these discourses are also part of my thoughts at the moment. It is clear to me that the Christian view of understanding my human condition encouraged me to meet the 'never thought of' and to be introduced to a different way of thinking about me and being freed from the usual interpretations (Müller, 1999).

More Feeling

As mentioned in my narrative I was put on psychiatric medication for the first time

when I was 17-years old. I then discontinued using it at the age of 18 and was re-started on it by a psychiatrist when I was 19. The usual combination of medication I was on consisted of an anti-psychotic, an anti-depressant, an anti-convulsant and something to lessen side effects. Three years later (aged 21) the ministry team that I went to live with decided that I did not need to be on medication anymore. Since there was a retired medical practitioner on the team, they were wise enough to slowly wean me off the medication. A few weeks later I noticed a change – I was beginning to feel more. I was able to become emotional.

It is widely recognised that anti-psychotic medication causes emotional deadening, which is most likely as a result of its primary effect of reducing distressing emotions associated with psychosis. However, Breggin (as cited in Williams, 2012) suggests that this often leads to additional side-effects that may include a lack of enjoyment and sense of meaning in life. I do remember this clearly from the time that I was put on an anti-psychotic. Everything felt the same and everything also felt like nothing.

My recollection of the change that happened when I stopped using medication is that I became more aware of the people around me and specifically their emotions. It was as if I was able to be much more attentive to what was going on in and around me. I do remember that I was fascinated by what I was sensing from people and would at times even cry over another person's suffering. It increased my interest in people and overall I would say that it probably made me feel more connected to people. I might even want to say that it left me feeling more human.

Therapeutic Homes

My exposure to different family environments had a significant impact on me psychologically and probably resulted in a fair amount of cognitive, emotional and behavioural change over time. It was mainly the homes of three different families as well as the larger 'family' of the missionary community that impacted me in this way.

Within these environments I was learning from my interaction with other people as well as learning from witnessing their interactions with each other. I saw different ways of dealing with conflict, of communicating one's needs, of being vulnerable, of being together; and I experienced various ways of feeling listened to, feeling safe, feeling worth, feeling normal, and feeling part of something. I felt accepted, unconditionally. It enabled me to realise and reframe certain ways in which I thought about people and human connection. It

was like a new world I was introduced to; a world where feelings and different ways of expression were allowed to happen. This was especially true during my time with the missionary community, as we were often given the chance to learn how to express ourselves through music, drawings, dances, and sculpting. I did not always feel comfortable enough to take part in these activities, but I was able to witness how the others were doing it and how much enjoyment they had while at play. I needed an environment that could tolerate ‘someone who was different’, ‘someone who was afraid of many things’, and ‘someone who lacked the emotional vocabulary to communicate herself’.

These environments exposed me to experiences where my old patterns of relating and interacting could be challenged, since these were new contexts with new role players (not the same people as my family of origin) (Nel, 2006). For instance: At home I would usually withdraw to my room most of the time, but because of being in a different context I began to interact with members of the families, since withdrawing would not have been feasible in the new context.

As an attempt to try and understand more about possible influences from my social environment and the psychological effect that this could have had on me, it seems helpful to invite Berke, Fagan, Mak-Pearce and Pierides-Müller (2002) to join this conversation. In their book *Beyond Madness: PsychoSocial Interventions in Psychosis* the authors explore the impact of a community with therapeutic qualities and some of the underlying principles upon which such communities function.

The Arbours Crisis Centre in London is an example of such a community and has quite an interesting story to tell. The centre was established in 1973 and uses a Psycho-Social approach (developed by Enrique Pichon-Rivière from Argentina) to help people get a better understanding of themselves through the experience of relationships in a community household. Those who go to the Centre for help are referred to as guests (not clients or patients) and mostly have been given diagnoses of depression, eating disorders, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder (to name a few) (Berke, 2002).

The individual is understood as an expression of society, family and surroundings, and the “psychotic” is the speaker who reveals that something in their context is wrong. The Crisis Centre's function is similar to Bion's (as cited in Forti, 2002) description of a mother who can tolerate the baby's frustration and by doing so enhances the conditions for the

development of his/her capacity to tolerate frustration. The Centre is a calm and reflective space where frustration, pain and horror have the opportunity to be transformed into something more bearable and meaningful (Forti, 2002). The authors state their treatment to be residential, psycho-social, and psychodynamic and that it is an environment that can provide a consistent, continuous presence of people to help the guests metabolise new sensations (Berke et al., 2002).

While reading their book I was particularly drawn to the case of Helen who had a long history of hospitalisations and tried to commit suicide on her first day at the Centre. She became silent for days on end while at the Centre, but listened to other guests' stories. She listened to their tragic stories and witnessed the interactions of other guests with the therapists around the Centre. They cried and laughed together; were horrified and openly angry together; they imagined and suffered pain together. This was new to Helen, for she had never experienced the detail of such “being together” before in her life. It was as if she was discovering a whole new world for the first time; a world where life and feelings were allowed to happen (Pierides-Müller, 2002) and to be worked with.

This, to me, sounds so similar to the way in which I experienced the world, and to how far away the possibility of interaction with people felt to me. When I was invited into the homes of families it often felt as if I was entering another world, because it seemed so foreign. I mostly felt that such interaction was never meant for me, because I was not human...because I was not supposed to feel anything.

My experience with families was not as therapy-specific as is the case with the Arbours Centre, but it eventually induced gradual change into the ways in which I thought about myself and other people. It took a multitude of *corrective emotional experiences* (Alexander & French, 1946) with individuals and families before I was able to believe that I did not need to fear these experiences and before I could genuinely interact with other people. The concept of corrective emotional experience refers to a process whereby the person faces certain situations again and again, but under more favourable circumstances. Emotional situations which were previously unbearable can then be dealt with in a manner different from the old (Alexander & French, 1946).

A statement that one of the therapists at a therapeutic community centre makes is that their work is based on the hypothesis that the human relationship of love is an integral force

to becoming human, and that the creation of an adult identity is influenced by many generations. The family is seen as the most important institutional structure that should introduce the human being to culture, but sometimes the family fails to do this and the child may not be guided towards an adult position of independence (Mogren, 2002).

My Meaning

My interaction with people encouraged a sense of feeling more connected to the world and I believe that this cultivated a sense of belonging. To feel that I belonged somewhere provided me with the sense that ‘I know now where I come from’, and ‘I now hope to know where I’m going’. In other words, I hope to find out who I am and why I was born. I was therefore beginning to make sense of myself within these contexts. My question at this stage is: what was it about these contexts that I was using to gain meaning from? As I understand it, the most prominent underlying narrative that these contexts shared was a religious narrative and I was using it to try and make sense of myself.

My experiences with the different families and missionary group involved people who worked and lived from a Christian perspective, and understood it as a lifestyle that should be expressed through one’s existence – the way you live and interact with the world (Neal, 2009). This is exactly what these individuals and families modelled to me at the time and I was attracted to how grounded it made me feel. Many of my beliefs began to change as I was more exposed to a Christian worldview, and the concept of suffering was one such belief.

Contrary to what I used to believe, I began to learn that suffering was not necessarily bad in itself and that it could be a part of life that one can learn and grow from. It is Frankl (2004) who mentions that despair is a result of suffering without meaning, and if a person can see meaning in their suffering then they can mould it into a sense of achievement or accomplishment. This was how it happened for me, because I had gone through a variety of experiences in life that I interpreted as very painful and traumatic and I was used to understanding this as something that ‘disabled’ me in a way. However, the Christian view helped me to understand it differently; that suffering is something that can be re-interpreted and given a new meaning and that it is possible to gain insight from seasons of suffering (Nouwen, 1996).

It was Weisskopf-Joelson (as cited in Frankl, 2004) who stated that the mental philosophy in society seems to stress the idea that people ought to be happy and that

unhappiness is a symptom of maladjustment. This could be why unhappiness is increased by unhappiness about being unhappy. The person who suffers and who is deemed incurable is often given very little opportunity to be proud of his/her suffering; to view it as a noble state rather than a degrading one. This could leave the person not only unhappy, but also ashamed of being unhappy.

Thus Christianity served as the foundation from which I began to understand good and bad experiences and my response to these – to fear, to feel rejected, to become angry to the point where I hate, wishing to die in order to escape, etcetera. The Christian perspective acknowledged both my good and bad qualities as a person and could give reasons for the existence of such qualities. It was no longer sinful to be angry or shameful to make mistakes; I rather began to understand it as something to work with and something that could be ready for change.

Certain religious practices also introduced me to self-search and introspection. An example is prayer and meditation, to practice becoming aware of my thoughts, feelings, and physical body. It introduced me to anticipation, hope and faith, since there were now things to look forward to – the potential blessing or growth after suffering, the idea of heaven, the spiritual connection with God and believing that we are all born for a unique purpose. These beliefs were therefore beginning to ‘answer’ certain questions for me regarding my existence.

It is suggested that religious involvement can lead to cognitive changes in one’s interpretation of stressful events and that such interpretations are usually associated with lower distress, anxiety and depression (Loewenthal, Macleod, Goldblatt, Lubitsh, & Valentine, 2000). It has also been noted that religious communities often provide their members with better social support and a feeling of belonging. Social support can be experienced through having people who know and care about you, people in whom you can confide and discuss your problems with, and people who can offer practical help when needed (Loewenthal, 2000). This was part of my experience while living with Christian communities.

Breaking the Silence through Expressive Writing

Expressing myself through writing assisted me in engaging with certain internal processes. My journals were the place where I started to develop a voice; it helped me feel safe enough to start talking.

Let me share Roberts' (1999) valuable comment with you. For some people the issue is not that their story might be fractured or lost (due to memory difficulties), but rather that it cannot be spoken because of fear or shame that make them feel that they are unable to tell it. Such silencing is often part of experiences of abuse or other traumatic events. The silenced story may be spoken inwardly, but not outwardly because the risk seems to be too great. It may become a heavy burden to carry, because if significant meaning in one's life is incommunicable you could become separated and alienated; which will hinder the process of change (Roberts, 1999). The story also becomes inescapable, because it is untellable and the person becomes trapped by their 'trauma story' (Campbell, 1998). There is potential for this silence to eventually become suffering, but it is in the naming of this silence that one can slowly begin to walk the road towards healing (Roberts, 1999).

My practice of expressive writing was the way in which I began to tell my inner stories for the first time. As I described it through my narrative, my home environment was a place where I felt silenced, insignificant and with little opportunity to explore myself as part of the world. I started writing down my thoughts for the first time in the year 2000. It was not something that someone told me to do; it was rather something that I decided to do in the spur of the moment when I felt emotionally overwhelmed and unable to cope. It was during a time that I did not want to behave in any manner that would cause my parents to worry, because I wanted to go back to 'A' in the Western Cape. So, I grabbed the first piece of paper I could find and started 'screaming' and 'crying' through my pen. I knew that I would show it to no one and so I could dare to tell the truth of what I was feeling.

At first I only wrote something down once or twice a week, but after a few weeks I was writing two to three times per day. It was everything and anything that made me worry, that made me wonder, that hurt me, that I was angry at or that I wished for. It was too frightening to think of sharing my deeper thoughts and feelings with another person, but I felt safe enough to write it down and hide the journal away so that no one knew. It gave me a 'voice' to speak my opinion, think my thoughts and express my feelings towards situations and people that I encountered at the time. My journals were spaces where I felt I could speak up and defend myself. Expressive writing created a chance for me to feel heard and to discover myself as separate from other people. In a way it felt like I was getting to know a new person; a stranger who never had the chance to tell her story.

It is believed that the very act of writing encourages a sense of empowerment and

especially when the person feels emotionally overwhelmed and out of control. The writing of poetry is an example of a genre that can be valuable to those who find it difficult to verbally express their thoughts or feelings – which is mostly the genre I used during the first two years of writing. A poem has the potential to serve as a holding environment between the person and their feelings, so that the poem is experienced as the trusted and safe environment in which feelings can be shared with the self (Hunter & Sanderson, 2007). It is said that when we write we are no longer being done to; we are doing (Vivienne, 2008). Writing in journals gives one the opportunity to become active in the writing of your specific traumatic story when you may previously have felt helpless, voiceless and powerless.

Storr (1997) shares the case of a patient who went through recurrent and dramatic psychotic episodes and who found that writing about these experiences supported her in finding a way through this process by having a tell-able, sharable story available to herself and others during her episodes, and it also served as a type of stability amidst times of instability for her. This same lady wrote a letter to her therapist years later (after she ended up publishing a book on her story), saying that she is convinced that a person cannot afford to forget all about very disturbing things in your own psyche, unless you have faced them; and that writing about such things is one way of accomplishing this.

I would like to agree by saying that my journals were ways in which I was attempting to engage with difficult emotional states that often left me feeling overwhelmed and even confused by not knowing how to process the emotions (how to express it and how to understand it). I used to suppress, ignore or dissociate from it, which was never helpful. My journal was the place where I was beginning to ‘face’ my inner world that felt so disturbing to me.

I also want to consider Sosin’s (1983) study on the function of a diary (or journal) as object, by saying that my journal most probably served as a transitional object for me. A transitional object is described by Winnicott (as cited in Galligan, 2000) as an external object that represents the ideal caregiver who is always present and accessible; it is thus a substitute ‘caregiver’, since it might take on the role of mirroring, soothing, helping to inhibit frightening impulses, and helping to integrate inner and outer realities (Sosin, 1983). Walrond-Skinner (as cited in Wallis & Poulton, 2001) holds that this functional role of the diary may become internalised into the psychic structure of the person which, according to Kirkpatrick (as cited in Granqvist, Ljungdahl, & Dickie, 2007), can foster a much needed

attachment for the individual as it becomes a secure base from which to explore the world.

The perceived relationship between me and God was one in which I understood God to be like a person; just a bigger, stronger, wiser version of mankind. In my mind I was beginning to share myself with God, whom I imagined to be the affectionate, empathic, congruent and trustworthy parent (possibly a projection of my unconscious wish for an ideal father or mother).

In light of this, one could probably further hypothesise that the relationship served as an attachment experience similar to what is normally experienced between children and their parents – as explained by seeking closeness to God, using God as a safe haven during times of distress, and experiencing it as my place of security (Granqvist et al., 2007). Kirkpatrick (as cited in Granqvist et al., 2007) suggested that one's perceived God relation may serve a “surrogate attachment” function that helps the insecurely attached person to gain a sense of security, particularly when other attachments have failed. My journal was therefore the mediator and structured, stable container for a relationship; an attachment. This was what I could handle emotionally at the time; only this manner of engagement; any other way would have been too direct and too fearful for me. I suspect that this was a necessary experience that prepared me psychologically for the next level of engagement later on, which was with an actual person.

In addition to this, my journal was a space where I went to discover my own self as separate and different from other people (especially my parents), which contributed to change by encouraging the process of individuation (referring to a mature differentiation between self and other with regards to past or present relationships) (Pine, 2004).

Overall it seems that the act of expressing myself through writing, and the content that I could write about, helped me with gradual psychological change in various areas. It allowed me to start with re-capturing a lost attachment bond, to individuate from others, to risk and believe that safe emotional spaces do exist, to realise that it is possible to give words to emotionally overwhelming material, and to learn how rewarding it can be to engage with another person.

Apart from the psychological effects that expressive writing contributed towards in my life, I also wonder about the eventual biological effects that it could have had. James Pennebaker has done numerous studies on the physical health benefits of expressive writing.

According to him it does not only have the potential to strengthen self-esteem, self-control, to empower, and give a voice to those who were never allowed to speak up; but can also have physical implications like strengthening the immune system when used as a way to disclose traumatic experiences (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). I can only imagine that it must have had a similar effect on my immune system in the long run.

Expressive writing played a therapeutic role in my life and it encouraged a lot of change in me over many years. It was always a place I could go to and its consistent presence never failed me.

Engagement with Self

Even though I was already engaging with my Self during moments of writing down my thoughts and feelings, I believe that there was an even deeper process of engagement present from 2003 when I started using an allegorical style of writing. As described in my narrative, this style of writing started after having a conversation with a counsellor on the parts of my inner Self that she believed were feeling hurt, afraid and distant. My intention at that stage was to try and engage more with my Self by writing more elaborately about the way in which I experienced my Self, which eventually resulted in the personification of certain strong emotions I used to feel. I remember being excited about this ‘discovery’ of being able to give names and character traits to my feelings. It was the first time that I felt I could ‘look’ at me and ‘talk’ to me, because now I had names and words for areas of me; I could identify ‘me’. Over time the ‘characters’ evolved even more until I imagined ‘them’ to be part of a distant world, which actually represented my inner ‘world’ and the way I experienced it to be. I called this world “My Woodland” and it became the way in which I could speak about my inner journey to eventual psychological integration and recovery.

Whitman (1987) describes an allegorical composition as involving personification of characters in a story. This is when abstract concepts are personified and a narrative is then formed around this – much like the process that happened with the creation of “My Woodland”. The therapeutic effect of allegories and/or myths has been noted in work with children who have had to face difficult life experiences. Allegorical tales can help bring emotional issues to the surface by avoiding unnecessary intrusion on the feelings or thoughts of the individual, which may provoke excessive anxiety or resistance. It is believed that the possible impact of an allegory is softened by the metaphor(s) that it contains (Early, 1993).

Today I understand “My Woodland” as a way in which I was able to engage with myself; a way that felt safe enough and indirect enough. My question at this point is: Why did I have to put my feelings into the form of characters; why did I have to personify them? I assume that emotions felt too overwhelming and confusing to me especially because I mostly struggled to identify and/or name the emotion, and that imagining emotions as ‘people’ who live somewhere in me provided me with a kind of containment; which probably increased my sense of security and safety to engage with these deeper processes.

One could also describe it as a way of externalizing my feelings, since I was personifying (objectifying) the emotions (the problems) that felt oppressive to me. It is possible that this process therefore helped me to experience the specific emotion as a separate entity, which then allowed me to explore my relationship to the emotion (the problem) (Hoyt, 2000).

Therefore, even though the act of personification can be seen as a way of distancing myself from overwhelming processes, it seems that it also eventually became the way in which I could connect with my Self; a way in which I could move towards a more integrated Self.

Integration and Disintegration as Part of Psychological Change

When considering the eventual effect of engaging with myself through expressive writing and specifically allegorical writing, it seems evident that there was a process of psychological integration (and therefore, change) that gradually occurred in me.

As I read through the journal entry at the end of my narrative, I become aware of an inner tension that seems to have been prominent for me during that time. It is tension that appears to be on a quest towards finding a different Self that I believed would have coped better or would have been more equipped to handle life. To a degree I did not believe that I was real, but rather that the real ‘me’ existed somewhere else and that I needed to go and find her because she would know how to live; she would be strong enough and ‘good enough’.

My first reaction was therefore to leave my Self (my cabin in my Woodland), thinking that I was never supposed to be the person I was. As I understood it I needed to go and search for meaning and strength outside of me, because it was not to be found within me. I unconsciously decided to deny what I knew about myself; however, to deny my Self was to deny my existence, which would only decrease the chance of relieving the existential tension

within me. I wanted to know why I was born; what my reason was for being alive, and why I had to suffer so much.

Another part of my struggle was between who I thought I was supposed to be and who I experienced myself to be. Comparing myself to the rest of society left me with the constant feeling of being out of the ordinary and in need of change. My narrative did not sound like any other person's that I knew, which often left me feeling guilty as I wondered whether I did something wrong to receive such a troubling existence.

The journey that I began to take through my Woodland is one in which my search for meaning therefore seems prominent. Even though my Self was present throughout the story (as the cabin that was in the forest), I was not aware of it and was continuously searching for a Self that contained less anxiety and more stability; I was constantly wishing for a different 'country'; a different Self. Frankl (2004) notes that inner tension over the search for meaning is needed for a person to be mentally healthy. He believes that a person's despair over the worthwhileness of life is an existential distress, but by no means a mental disease.

It was only after I had left my view of Self (my cabin) that I could return and see it for what it was. When looking at the last journal entry in my narrative, it seems that this was the first time I began to reflect on my Self. I became aware of myself as others might see me; I saw that I had good and bad qualities and that these were all part of me. As I looked at my Self I realised that I *can* be acceptable as I am, and if I could accept more areas of my Self then I could believe that other people could also accept me. It is possible that the variety of new experiences I had prior to this, helped to develop my concept of self to such a degree that it enabled me to view myself through different eyes with new realisations and different interpretations about my experiences in the world. It is also possible that I needed to disintegrate to a degree (walking away from my cabin; my Self) before deeper integration could begin; so, maybe disintegration was an important part of my integration.

I am intrigued by Dąbrowski's (as cited in Nixon, 1998) interpretation of disintegration and the positive connotation he puts to it. He views unpleasant experiences, and particularly existential shock and anxiety, as necessary for growth and understands this "disintegration" as a "positive breakdown" that the person has to live through before achieving deeper personality development. His theory leaves one with the sense that psychological turmoil is an acceptable part of the process of deeper personal growth; that we do not necessarily need to think of it as *wrong*, and consequently cover its 'face' with guilt,

denial, or the blunting effects of medication.

Paris Williams (2012) notes several accounts of cases where individuals diagnosed with psychoses were able to recover as they struggled through their disintegrated state. An important part of the recovery process that he highlights is the destabilisation of cognitive constructs (the particular framework a person develops to interpret incoming sensory data from the environment) that seem to occur directly before onset of a psychotic breakdown. Similar to Dabrowski (as cited in Nixon, 1998), Williams sees this as a rather important part of the individual's process towards recovery, since it allows the person to come into contact with their deeper core psychological issues. Realisation, acceptance and even understanding can then begin to occur and together with adequate social support the person's cognitive constructs can integrate into a new way of being and hopefully towards a more stable self.

What I would like to highlight from these theorists is that they acknowledge psychological breakdown as a necessary part of the process towards psychological stability. I believe that this describes part of my own journey towards a more integrated Self; a Self that could eventually begin to metabolise life's experiences into a more bearable and meaningful form.

Gaining Knowledge

Another influence to my psychological condition was exposure to knowledge on the psychology of people. I remember the first book that had a significant impact on my understanding of the effect of one's childhood experiences on your current view of the world. The book's name was *The Drama of Being a Child*, by Miller (1997) and I found it in a library on one of the American missionary bases in 2003. I only read one chapter, but that was enough for me to gain insight into the possibility of understanding more reasons to my psychological struggle.

The second book that contributed significantly to my insight on the effect of emotional abuse in families was *Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse*, by Jantz (2003), which I found while working at the bookshop in 2004. I remember this being the first time I learned about things can be regarded as emotionally abusive towards another person. It made me aware that I was not the only one to blame for some of the psychological struggles I had experienced until then; allowing some relief from the guilt I was feeling. I also began to attend personal growth courses at a Christian Institute during that time and was exposed to

books that involved teachings on personal boundaries, relationships and the psychology of the individual. I learned about the reason for, and impact of, one's thoughts and behaviour on your quality of life and gained insight into the effect of these on my own life.

In 2005 I started studying psychology and learned even more about the biology and psychology of people. It began to equip me with some answers to questions I used to have regarding the diagnoses and treatment that I received years prior to that. To a degree it was assisting me with language to explain what I had been through and why. It was therefore yet another part of my story that was becoming tell-able.

A year later I started attending psychotherapy sessions with a clinical psychologist who was knowledgeable on family systems theory. It was here that I heard about the family as a dynamic system for the first time, as well as the impact that the type of communication between family members can have on a child's psychological development. I was introduced to the work of Paul Watzlawick (Watzlawick et al., 1967) and was encouraged to read his work. For the first time in my life I could realise that I did not need to carry so much responsibility for many things that caused distance, bitterness and sadness in my family. After more or less two years in therapy I literally felt lighter as my chest did not feel so heavy when I would breathe anymore. This feeling was closely related to the guilt I used to feel; when the guilt left, I felt lighter.

Therapy helped me to become aware of the type of communication in my family and the impact it had on my sense of reality. It helped me to trust my feelings and thoughts to a degree where I could believe that it was true and real in the moment. It taught me about having a relationship with a real person and what it means to feel vulnerable, yet safe, in the presence of another. This experience was eventually part of that which began to convince me on a deeper level that I wanted to live life; I wanted to engage with people because I was beginning to enjoy it.

There was also a time during the process of therapy that I was invited to attend a family constellations workshop. That experience made me aware of the patterns of anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, fear, chronic illness or unfulfilled relationships that may exist across generations in one's family; the history of the family (Hellinger, n.d.). It motivated me to do research into the lives and stories of my parents and the generations of parents before them. I had multiple conversations with members from my extended family and eventually learned about the often difficult family situations that my parents had cope with during their

childhood. Learning about this helped me to grow in empathy towards my parents and years later I was able to let go of anger and bitterness towards them; I could begin to accept them and to love them.

The exposure to knowledge increased my insight into personal struggles as I learned more about possible reasons and/or explanations for these. It allowed me to learn ways of managing myself in the world by reading about other people's experiences or even by experiencing it myself in a psychotherapeutic context. Increased knowledge gave me more words to describe my struggle and exposed me to information that could free me from feeling guilty and ashamed. It normalised the inner crisis for me.

Personal Characteristics Contributing to Change

Researchers suggest that there are certain personal characteristics that seem important to the influence of positive psychological change. One of these is a person's overall insight into their condition and is believed to be important for the occurrence of change. Such insight involves having an enduringly stable understanding of your situation. Additional factors that are influential to the process of change are the willingness and openness to experience anxiety or difficulty, a readiness to face a level of anxiety that could be overwhelming, the perseverance and determination to pull yourself through difficult situations, as well as the willingness to spend energy (in thought or behaviour) on the process of change (Hanna, Giordano, Dupuy, & Puhakka, 1995).

When considering my narrative I think that my consistent understanding was that something was not as it should or could be and that my human condition was not according to what I was seeing around me (compared to other people's lives). I was therefore of the idea that I was different and that my 'difference' was causing disconnection from the world. Throughout my story I do hear a constant awareness of my perceived position in the world and the sense of worthlessness and meaninglessness that it left me with. To me it seems that this awareness of 'difference' and my yearning for change were indications of insight into my situation at the time.

With regards to my willingness to face and persevere through overwhelming levels of anxiety and fear, it does seem (from descriptions in my narrative) that I was not frightened by intensity, although I do not think it was easy for me; my ability to face these intensities might have been supported by ways in which I could channel some of these strong emotions. An

example of this was to start writing about experiences and to eventually dare talking about them.

I suppose my competitive nature also played a role in the occurrence of change in my life, since I do realise from my story that I never decided to give up. I did 'stand still' at times while trying to carry overwhelming emotions or circumstances, but I somehow could not give up the idea that things may be different for me. I suspect that this helped me to persevere so that change could continue in the background. Ezpeleta, Granero, De la Osa and Guillamon (as cited in Australian Psychological Society, 2014) suggest that high levels of persistence is one of the characteristics of people who tend to be more resilient, and as I read through my narrative I cannot help but recognise myself as a resilient character in my story.

Psychological resilience refers to the flexibility in one's response to changing situational demands, as well as your ability to bounce back from negative emotional experiences (Block & Kremen, 1996; Lazarus, 1993). Resilience gives people the strength to tackle problems, overcome adversity and move on with their lives (Cherry, n.d.). Various studies have been done on personal characteristics and environmental factors that constitute more resilient individuals. Personal characteristics that are believed to be associated with more resilient people are strong problem-solving skills, the willingness to ask for help and the openness to learn, acquiring the conviction that you can overcome problems by your own actions, using and relying on resources of support (family and/or community) that can increase your competency and self-efficacy, engaging in active coping (not reacting passively to negative circumstances, but actively seeking out people and opportunities that can lead to positive change of your situation), conversion to a religious faith, intelligence and creativity (Cherry, n.d.; Kumpfer, 1999; Werner, 2005).

Good social and communication skills are also associated with more resilient individuals (Kumpfer, 1999). The ability to form social connections and to use these when necessary to talk about the challenges you might be facing, can be a good way to gain perspective and to find new solutions (Cherry, n.d.). It has also been found that resilient individuals often make more use of their community resources by seeking emotional support from community members or 'recruiting' substitute caregivers (in the case of children) (Werner, 2005).

I suppose that some of the above-mentioned characteristics and competencies contributed to my ability to work through negative emotional experiences. I also think that

some of these characteristics developed later on in my life whereas others were more innate qualities (e.g. being creative).

The more prominent characteristics seem to have been my willingness to ask for help and my openness to learn, since there is a strong indication that I used resources in my community to increase my ability to cope. To tell a teacher that I wanted to end my life; to later on communicate my difficult circumstances to people who could then reach out to help me through inviting me to live with them for a few weeks; to go to a clinical psychologist years later when I felt the need to talk to someone. These are all ways in which I was making use of resources in my immediate environment.

In addition to this it seems that I was more active later in my attempt to cope with difficult circumstances. During the first part of my narrative I do think that I was responding more passively to the perceived negative circumstances, but then it started to change during my last hospital admission and I suspect that this change from passive to active was ‘forced’ on me by my desperation for things to be different. It is not as if I did nothing after ‘A’ came to visit me; instead, I decided to actively involve myself by searching for answers; for hope.

My belief in the Christian faith was another prominent factor. Conversion to a religious faith is believed to provide its believers with structure, a sense of community and the assurance of salvation, which can contribute to a person’s resiliency (Werner, 2005). This was indeed the case in my life as my faith gave me meaning and a community, which left me with a sense of belonging and connection (Walker & Frieson, 2005).

Another characteristic that has been mentioned as influential to a person’s ability to be resilient is their level of cognitive functioning. Kandel et al. (as cited in Kumpfer, 1999) state that most studies have found higher cognitive levels to be associated with the more resilient person. From my narrative I realise that I never really thought of myself as capable of any kind of achievement. I often perceived myself as slow and therefore not intelligent. This perception only began to change when I started working in the local bookshop and realised that I was able to work and keep a job. It changed even more when I realised I was able to complete individual subjects in psychology while studying part-time. A few years later I read Gardner’s (1983) book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* and could realise that I was intelligent enough to try at life and that being intelligent was not only about having 80 percent for a mathematics test.

One's ability to be a creative thinker is also beneficial to being a more resilient individual and can be of good use when having to solve problems in life. My ability to think creatively helped me to not give up too early when faced with problems, because I would usually be able to think of alternative ways on how to deal with these problems. It was not always successful, but my ability to generate many ideas often gave me the courage to try again, hoping that it would be successful.

There are certainly more suggestions from literature on the development of resilience in people. Those that have been mentioned so far seem to be the most prominent characteristics that are generally mentioned in most studies that I have consulted.

More Voices from Literature

In light of the factors that I have explored so far regarding the occurrence of psychological change in my narrative, I would like to consider the findings from other studies on change. Research on this phenomenon has mostly focused on the mechanism of the change process itself by exploring people's lived experiences of psychological change (Gianakis & Carey, 2011; Higginson & Mansell, 2008). Despite the diverse experiences of participants in these studies there seems to be somewhat similar themes within their experiences of recovery and psychological change, and it would be interesting to see how this overlaps with influences that have been identified from exploring my own narrative.

Criteria that have been found through these studies as influential to the experience of change outside of the psychotherapeutic context are: an individual's awareness of their inner tension at a given time and moving towards the resolution of this tension, moments of realisation as a result of sudden or gradual insight into a situation, relationships with others, moments of learning through the process of experience, and themes related to one's concept of self and view of the world (Gianakis & Carey, 2011; Higginson & Mansell, 2008).

It seems that most of what these researchers found overlaps with findings from my own narrative. Gianakis and Carey (2011) mention the awareness of inner tension and the attempt to resolve it as central to people's experience of psychological change. Such awareness seems to be present in my narrative as I became aware of my condition and was dissatisfied with how things were. The discrepancy between how things were and my perception of how it was supposed to be probably caused a lot of this inner tension for me.

There are also moments of realisation in my narrative and these are closely linked to

the level of insight I had at particular moments. The gradual realisation that no one is really able to help and/or assist me in the manner that I was hoping for and that I would have to take ownership and responsibility for finding help and hope, is one such moment of realisation. There was also the realisation of the possibility for things to be different, which I mostly realised through experiences with families and individuals.

With regards to relationships with others I would say that there were a variety of experiences that helped to change my perception of human interaction. It helped me to experience what genuine human connection is like and how different it could be from what I knew. In my case I would also want to add the notion of relationship with Self and God, which I believe was influential to my ability to initiate and maintain relationships with people later on, since it probably enabled me to feel safe and overcome a deeper fear of connection.

There are also various moments of learning through experience in my narrative, which involved exposure to different family and community environments that had a therapeutic effect on my life. Additional learning took place through exposure to books, courses, workshops and my eventual pursuit into the field of psychology. Gianakis and Carey (2011) further mention themes related to one's concept of self, which involves moving towards a sense of identity. In my narrative it seems that this was present in times when I began to take responsibility for my life by making my own choices, especially the decision to start searching for change.

It is further present in experiences that positively impacted on my sense of worth and finding meaning, which was where religious involvement played a role. My view of the world and my position in the world was altered by a Christian understanding of the human condition as well as assisting me with thoughts of and direction in life.

A Brief Summary on Psychological Change

I started the exploration of change with two questions in mind regarding the nature of the change that occurred as well as possible contextual and/or intrapersonal factors that might have encouraged such change.

The areas of change that have been identified so far seem to slot into either a behavioural category or a cognitive and emotional category. With regards to behavioural change it is evident that the most prominent changes were: Actively searching for interaction with people; the act of practicing meditation and prayer; engaging in new patterns of

interpersonal behaviour; sleeping less during the day and having more physical energy (as my medication dosage was lowered); journal writing; actively seeking knowledge by reading more and attending courses; increased resilient behaviour (e.g. seeking help from available resources).

On the cognitive and emotional side there are a number of factors that were identified during the explorative phase. The most prominent changes are: Increased existential tension; desperation for things to be different; taking responsibility for my life; an increased sense of self-worth and identity; confronting my fear; learning about the possibility of positive experiences with other people; a changed worldview; developing a sense of meaning, direction and belonging; less anxiety over my future; feeling more connected to Self and others; gradual acceptance of Self; increased sense of empowerment; awareness over the impact of external factors on my internal state; moving towards a more integrated Self.

Apart from identifying change, I was also interested in factors that could have encouraged such change, which concerns the second question with which I entered this explorative phase. The most noticeable influences were: Difficult and uncomfortable practical circumstances; exposure to new interpersonal experiences; exposure to a different conceptualisation of my condition; physically moving away from home; discontinuing psychiatric medication; exposure to knowledge; psychotherapy.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this chapter it is important to once again note that the aim of exploration in this study is rather to create a process of understanding than reach a point of closure; to rather open up conversations than attempt to give answers or solutions. In the next and final chapter I would like to move towards concluding this conversation about change in my narrative, through sharing my reflections and adding a meta-perspective to the process.

CHAPTER 5

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of the study thus far and to reflect upon the research process. My intention is not to create a grand finale that strives for closure (Wolcott, 2001), but to rather add to the conversation that started in “Chapter 4”. I have involved myself with the process of this research for almost five years now, and change has certainly been part of this journey. Throughout the study there have been moments of learning and realisation that have allowed me to ‘meet’ new interpretations, ask new questions and develop new ideas along the way. In the next few pages I would like to reflect on these moments with you. But first, let us review the journey up to now.

The Road so Far

The initial focus at the onset of this study was on the occurrence of psychological change in my life over a period of time. My exploration started with the question of how it was possible for change to happen in my life, and as I consulted literature on the course of naturally occurring change, my research question became more specific as it aimed at identifying moments of change in my narrative, as well as exploring the potential involvement of contextual factors on the identified areas of change.

At the same time I began to ponder with Higginson and Mansell (2008) over the contribution that this study may bring to the current understanding of the process and mechanisms of psychological change as a natural occurrence and how this may inform our knowledge of change in the psychotherapeutic context (Gianakis & Carey, 2011). I further wondered over the possibility of personal and professional growth as an outcome to studying my own narrative, and began to listen to and learn from voices in literature that speak about being a congruent person who models genuineness (Corey, 2005) within and outside of the psychotherapeutic environment.

I then started writing an account of my life and included several excerpts from journals that were written between 2002 and 2008 that served to orient the reader to the earlier backdrop of my story. I set off to explore and interpret psychological change and its relations to larger social influences on my life – an endeavour that is inherently supported by the autoethnographic design of this study. During this process I also invited authors and

theorists to join the conversation. Listening to their interpretations helped me to approach my story from different angles than before, pushing me towards greater insight and eventually resulting in new thoughts regarding change.

Old and New Thoughts

One of the new thoughts that I gained during the process of this study, involved the realisation that there seemed to be a sequential pattern to psychological change in my narrative, in that certain changes could only happen after certain other experiences of growth and/or breakdown had occurred (Williams, 2012).

As I am reflecting on this idea now, I am also becoming aware that this “sequence” that seems so prominent, further involved complex and dynamic inter-relations between the various factors influencing psychological change. I am careful to imply that there was a strict order to *how* change happened, as this leaves me with the idea that as soon as one type of change ended the next one could begin. I would rather want to propose that the processes of change were interrelated and part of a lively unconscious ‘dialogue’ in which various aspects of the Self was constantly manoeuvring for relief from my inner conflict. However, all this inner psychological ‘movement’ did not seem to happen all at once, and this is the “sequence” that I am referring to. Certain inner processes *allowed* others to happen, other processes *forced* some to occur, and there were some that *depended* on another process of growth before it could develop.

I am thinking of the interaction between my relations with people and my relation with God. On the one hand I needed a perceived connection with God before I could engage with people; on the other hand, I needed to witness other people’s conviction of God’s safety before I could imagine God as safe, personal, and relational. I needed these two experiences to interact with each other within me before I could grow in my connection with others.

An additional thought that occurred to me during the process of this study concerns the importance of environmental support during that time of my life. Dabrowski (as cited in Nixon, 1998) suggested that environmental support often ‘accompanies’ the person through their state of disintegration, and he often prescribed such support to the individuals he treated. This is not only present in my story, but (as I now realise) also informs the way I work as a therapist. Throughout my practical training as psychologist I have often become aware of my tendency to incorporate environmental resources to assist the therapeutic processes of some

of the individuals I have worked with, since I have come to understand that it allows for exposure to various experiences that may prove helpful in the person's journey towards growth; therapeutic experiences that I, as therapist in an office, may not be able to offer that person.

Similarly, throughout my narrative it is evident that I was exposed to a range of different experiences that proved helpful towards my personal growth in the long run. My 'therapy' therefore involved exposure to different contexts and it was not only conversion to a religion, or life in different family environments, or discontinuation of psychiatric medication, or long-term psychotherapy that brought change. It was never only one or two of these influences, but rather all of them.

This brings me back to my earlier statement over the notion of *talk-therapy* being simply one more way of relating among the myriad of 'languages', as a way to 'reach out' to a psychologically wounded person. If we, as therapists, want to assist people more effectively towards psychological growth then we need to increase our understanding of the factors that can positively or negatively influence a person's inner condition. It has been stated that one of the next challenges to psychotherapy research is identifying the mechanisms, or active ingredients, of change in effective treatments, because this would help researchers to learn more about possibilities that could make psychotherapy more effective (Coleman, Cole, & Wuest, 2010; Murray, 2002).

Likewise, Higginson and Mansell (2008) noted that *how* and *why* psychological change occurs is not fully understood yet, and that we need more research on change within and outside the psychotherapeutic context to become more knowledgeable on the influencing factors. Such knowledge may affect the nature of our work as therapists (Gianakis & Carey, 2011). As mentioned before, this is part of the reason why I attempted this study.

There is currently only a small body of research on psychological change as a natural occurrence (outside of the usual psychiatric and psychological interventions) and as studied from the perspective of the person who has changed, since researchers usually explore change from the therapist's point of view (Gianakis & Carey, 2011). This is where my study contributes to existing research, as it has explored change from both instances.

So far I have reflected on reasons for attempting this study, as well as linking it to certain contributions towards current research on psychological change. It is from here that I

would now like to consider the more personal impact of this study on me as researcher, participant, therapist and ‘patient’.

A Present from my Past

The writing of this study has assisted me with re-writing my story. I have re-visited and re-researched my narrative in an attempt to re-collect myself (Roberts, 1999). Engaging with this process has made me more aware of the value that experiences from my past have given me.

Part of this value is related to my work as therapist, where I am in the position of working with people who mostly find themselves struggling through life in various ways. Experiencing and re-visiting my personal narrative over the past few years has helped me to be less afraid of being with another person in their state of intense emotional experience, and to know and believe that it is possible to sit within one’s own state of turmoil and survive it – as I discovered from personal experience. It is Schneider (as cited in Williams, 2012) who suggests that:

If we can muster the courage and willingness to face our present experience with equanimity, regardless of how painful that might be, we find that it’s possible to develop a sense of mastery within our experience. We learn that we can develop the ability to return to a more tolerable middle ground after having extreme experiences, and as our confidence builds in this regard, we find that we can continue to expand the range of tolerable experiences along the continuum...As we develop this capacity...the range of experiences that are tolerable to us widens, we feel the anxieties of isolation and engulfment less acutely, and we find that even when we do have experiences that take us outside of our window of tolerance, we are able to [survive it]. (p. 188).

I therefore believe that my history has helped me to ‘grow stronger muscles’ to contain intense experiences within myself, and others. It has furthermore cultivated in me an ability to hope for the possibility of deeper change, change that can shift a person into a place where they can engage more with the world and self.

In addition to this, I have grown into accepting the story of my inner ‘patient’ and to experience relief from the shame and fear that used to accompany too many parts of my Self.

Now that I have been able to write and think about the immense power of societal discourse surrounding mental ‘illness’, I am more able to see what it has done to my sense of identity. It seems that I have gained a feeling of belonging through my conversations with authors from literature. Almost as if I have found my place and have gained language through which I can express and explain my past. Thus, adding meaning. In this way the value that this research has added to my life can be linked back to another initial reason for doing this study – my growth as therapist.

Having Patience with my Inner Patient

Another way in which this research has impacted me has to do with an increased acceptance of my Self.

During the production of the texts I often experienced anxiety over how I was presenting myself. As much as I wanted to present an authentic self, I also became aware that I wanted to protect myself and I suppose this had to do with an inner conflict which was essentially between two ‘voices’ – the ‘patient’ with her fears from the past, and the therapist who wanted to help.

I can agree with Vivienne (2008) by saying that the exploration and re-interpretation of my story has assisted in putting my past and present selves into dialogue. Doing this study has allowed my ‘voice’ as patient to emerge and for the therapist in me to listen attentively and unconditionally to the experience of my past; to become aware of discursive ‘voices’ that have influenced the meaning I attached to experiences; to make time and space for my history and to comfortably accept it as part of me. Roberts (1999) states that “...to be ourselves we must have ourselves – posses, or repossess, our life-stories. We must re-collect ourselves, recollect the inner drama, our narrative.” (p. 13).

Today, after five years of re-visiting my history systematically by doing this research, I can say that I own myself more than before. I used to be afraid and ashamed. Now I am rather aware and more or less able to ‘carry’ my past as a valuable part of me that can constantly assist my journey towards becoming a more effective therapist, and hopefully a more genuinely integrated person. I have realised that it is not so much where I have been than what I am doing with where I have been, that seems to matter. My history is not something that can leave me. It will always travel with me. The one thing left for me to do is to embrace it.

In addition to my perceived psychological growth, I can also say that I developed as researcher through this process of doing autoethnography.

Doing autoethnography

Autoethnography is described as an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience in order to advance our understanding of the experience (Wall, 2008). However, this way of doing research can be very challenging in terms of its representation, as well as its intimate and personal nature.

During the first four years of doing this study I spent most of my effort on trying to solve the problem of *how* to present my story in an academically acceptable format, while at the same time preserving its emotionally provocative nature. It was only later (in the fifth year) that I met with an idea on how to do it, which is similar to Wall's (2008) experience where her story "evolved" over time to conform to academic convention.

In retrospect, I can now see that all those years of 'searching' was not a lost cause, as I was actually busy with a lonely quest of trying to find my shape, my format, my style and myself as researcher. The journey of falling and failing was necessary for me to grow in my understanding and certainty over the reasons for my decisions in doing what I have done with this study. It was part of developing my identity as researcher.

Ongoing Thoughts

As an attempt to temporarily close this conversation I would like to leave you, as reader, with a few thoughts that this research has awakened in me.

A first thought concerns the shortcomings of this study. Even though the autoethnographic design allowed an in-depth exploration of my subjective experience within particular contexts, and even though it does enable a way to examine features of personal experience that would not normally be observable to researchers who study other people's narratives (Dauphinee, 2010; Vryan, 2006); I would still be curious to hear interpretations from other researchers after their exploration of my narrative. I believe a 'non-participant' does have a certain amount of distance (or dare I say, 'objectivity') from which to ponder psychological change in my story, which could certainly add richness to the findings.

I have further realised that my study mainly focused on factors that presumably encouraged psychological change, without giving much attention to that which might have

inhibited the process of change. Studies into this area can undoubtedly continue to inform our understanding of change to the psychology of a person and should be considered for future research.

Additional thoughts concern our current nosology in South Africa. Even though it seems we have mainly used a medical/disease based manner of treatment for mental health problems in this country, I often wonder over the effectiveness of this system. This model never allowed me the freedom to think other thoughts over my condition, which is exactly what makes it so powerful and disabling to the person who is under its ‘treatment’. I also do not seem to be the only person who did not find deeper, lasting recovery from this system, since it seems there are more stories out there who share a similar outcome (Berke et al., 2002; Slater, 1996; Williams, 2012).

There are also many who have stated their ideas on what we should do for the mainstream mental health care system to be more beneficial. Walker (2006) proposes “a total transformation in education in the mental health profession” (p. 81); Williams (2012) recommends a “society-wide paradigm shift” towards a more integrated understanding of the human condition; and Berke et al. (2002) offer a psycho-social approach to understanding the suffering individual, while using their therapeutic living centres to assist with long-lasting recovery from various ‘conditions’.

I continuously find myself envisioning change in the way that mental health care users are treated, as it is often too sad to be part of a system that seems to treat most problems with very little hope for growth or change. I was privileged enough to meet with *Hope*; and I do struggle to simply accept that my story is one in a million that could experience change, while the rest cannot.

(Journal entry, 2014)

We all have pain, it just looks different; and sometimes it takes a lot more time and effort to make sense of it. Other times you want to give up because reason does not want to come. During such life-seasons the world tends to keep ‘staring’ at you...making you think that you are not supposed to be where you are...who you are; making you feel too different and even abnormal. I used to become anxious when this would happen; worrying about an eventual consequence like rejection. But, it seems this is not necessary anymore.

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