

From Sisyphus to Métis: The Transformative Power of Literary Métissage

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From Sisyphus to Métis: The Transformative Power of Literary Métissage

Abstract

This thesis is a heart centered literary métissage. The name literary métissage takes the word Métis and reclaims it from its pejorative use, meaning half-breed, and refers back instead to the Greek goddess Métis, who was a shapeshifter and the first wife of Zeus. The word also refers back to mixticius, the Latin for the weaving of cloth from different fibres. Literary métissage is a braiding together of pieces of writing, usually by different authors, to allow the braiding or weaving of the works together to reveal something new, beyond what each piece says on its own. In my work I wove together different genres of writing and autobiographical works from memories of various times in my life. The juxtaposition of the works led to new revelations as I explored three paths of inquiry. The first path of inquiry concerns my father and memories of conversations I had with him about war and God when I was between the ages of ten and twelve. I wanted to tell this part of his story and bring more love and honour to the memory of my father. The second path of inquiry deals with my exploration of God's love; I knew it yet I felt I did not have a full experience of it. Due to the fatherly image of God that I grew up with, I had a theory that writing my memories of the talks with Dad might help me dismantle whatever walls stood in between me and the love that I believed waited on the other side. On this path of inquiry, I used my personal journal entries and researcher's notebook. As the second path of inquiry moved to the background and the first one consumed my writing life, a third path emerged. This path *focused on identity and issues of self, and its evolution was an organic result of other aspects of the writing process.* These three strands interacted in a dynamic way and produced surprising results.

This thesis is a collection of stories have been told again and again over the course of

many years. In this process of retelling, the stories themselves became reified. To bring them back to life, they had to be approached from new angles with new ways of writing. It was also necessary for a critical consciousness to be brought to this inquiry. Throughout this time, the thesis process was monitored by the use of a researcher's notebook where reflections on the journey and connections between the process of writing and day-to-day life were recorded. It is on this third path of inquiry where the process of transformation began. Through the process of exploring literary *métissage*, which was a weaving back and forth between memory and a new subjective experience of memory (along with reflection on both of these), a flexible view of self began to evolve. My concept of identity shifted from a single, fixed thing to a multiple, open one. Schwandt (2007) describes the postmodern view of self as "always fragmented, never integrated, never fixed, always becoming" (p. 144). This shift in identity was born out of the gifts of *métissage*: the blending of literary genres and the flexibility of thinking that comes out of leaving a dualistic perspective. This concept of self made it possible to approach the past in a way that allowed things to be seen that once were invisible.

Several types of writing were employed to research the memories: poetry, narrative, personal journals, letters, and a researcher's notebook. This mixture of genres proved to be very important to the life of the work and led to discoveries that may not have otherwise been made. Literary *métissage* embraces a blurring of literary genres. In this work the poems are narratives and the narratives have many poetic qualities. Each genre was used as a tool to help uncover the truths which were being sought.

This literary *métissage* is a form of creative memoir that is followed by an exegesis. The exegesis provides an interpretation of the work, grounding it in theory and exploring critical

issues related to this kind of writing in education. In the exegesis the literature of life writing is connected to the literature of literary métissage and the attendant issues of identity, memory, and transformation.

The transformation which came out of my work was initiated by prayer and reflection on writing and memories. Another important catalyst in this process was the connection with other life writers. The perspectives on self of other life writers and the gifts of wisdom which they have brought back from inner journeys have been a guide for my work. I have often felt like Bilbo Baggins, the unlikely hero of *The Hobbit*, setting off for an adventure somewhat unwittingly. The life writers have been like Gandalf to me, showing up when I was in dire need, and getting me to the next place in my journey. I cannot imagine how I would have managed without them. I am grateful to every writer who has openly shared the experience of life writing. As I wrote my own life and read theirs, the experience became a generous communion.

It has been my hope that if compassion comes to my father and to myself through this writing, then it would be extended to other veterans and other children of veterans. I offer my writing in the sincere wish that the reader's heart and mind are engaged. Natalie Goldberg explains why we write memoir: "We surrender ourselves so others can feel what we felt and be enlarged" (Goldberg, 2007, p. 147). In this way, I hope to bridge the gap from my particular story to universal stories of war, love and faith.

Keywords: literary métissage, transformation, memoir, identity.

Dedication

For my father, Willard Gordon Wigmore, who suffered too much. I love you, Dad. I still bear your sorrow and wish I could make it right.

For God, my heavenly father, healer and giver of all good things. You pour out love on me but there is a wall which keeps me from receiving your messages. I pray this work will help dismantle that wall.

For my brothers and sisters who have lived with a person whose spirit has been broken by war: I know your pain. My hope is that we can let go of some of the burden in the sharing.

Love,

Donna

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There are several people who have been important in my work. My dear friends, Elizabeth and Lorraine, and my sister, Joan, have given me confidence as a writer, loved me, and given me hope as I wrote. Long before I did anything as a writer or came close to identifying as a writer, Don, my former partner and the father of my daughter, gave me a gift that has had a lasting impact. He believed in me as a writer, and made a mahogany lap desk for me. This beautiful work has been a hope chest for me through the years leading up to now, when I dare, finally, to take on the identity of a writer. I need to thank Don, too, for all of the times when I was in the crunch of a writing deadline and he took Olivia and nurtured her so well. My church family, which is so very real to me, has given me strength and love through rough times. I want to especially mention Julie and Arron, Mary Lynn and Philip, and Paul. Thank you for taking me further into the heart of God.

I am forever grateful to the Graduate Support Group at the University of Prince Edward Island, which has been a wonderful resource through the thesis process. Thank you to my fellow thesis writers; it has been a wonderful journey. To Anna Baldacchino; thank you for the prayers, for hosting our gatherings, and for your warm heart. Joanne MacNevin; what a help you have been to me in the last few months! Thanks for keeping the hotline open. Your insight into academic matters and your appreciation for my work have kept me going. I am so glad you were a part of my adventure.

A huge shalom and thanks goes to Sean Wiebe, my thesis supervisor. Sean has been instrumental, not only by questioning me and supporting my work, but also by presenting the work of other writers, the first of whom is Carl Leggo. I have always wanted to write, yet this is

the first time I have engaged in creative writing and shared it. It was very difficult for me to begin to write, and I cannot express how helpful it has been for me to read the work of other writers on writing. I owe Carl my deep appreciation; his work has done much to liberate me as a writer. I am so glad that I was able to have Suzanne Thomas as a second Committee Member. Her insightful comments, clarifying questions, and thoughtful suggestions have proved to be very helpful in guiding me in the revisions of my writing.

In the fall of 2009, Sean invited me to attend the International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry. This was a profound experience for me. Carl Leggo was gracious enough to help me work with major questions about how much detail to include when writing about loved ones. This symposium offered a chance to hear other writers share their poetry and the many different ways their poetry was used to seek truth. The conference was punctuated by a lively appearance by Deirdre Kessler, a Charlottetown writer. Deirdre led us through an activity called Clothesline Poetry, where we each wrote a line about home and identity and then the lines were read together. (This was the first time a poem of mine had been read publicly and I thank the audience for gasping as my line was read.) Deirdre generously gave me an afternoon later when I was struggling with writer's block. She helped me see my time with Dad in a new way. This perspective has borne fruit and I believe it will continue to do so. She helped me see that although I wasn't able to take Dad's pain away, by listening to him I had done something very important. He was heard. And he knew in those moments that my heart was with him.

In honouring my father, I also wanted to bring honour to other veterans. I invite those who have lived with family who have been in combat to explore this text. I pray that they will find compassion and peace not only for their parents, but for themselves as well.

The final thanks goes out to my daughter, my darling, Olivia: thank you for your patience and love and unsolicited hugs while your mother was writing and not writing, but too perturbed by writer's block to be of any use to you.

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(The fonts for all of the creative writing in this thesis are as follows: Times New Roman for the Introduction and the Exegesis, *Italicized Times New Roman for Donna's Stories*, ***Italicized Bold Times New Roman for Personal Journal Entries and the Researcher's Notebook***, *Lucida Handwriting for Poetry*, *Italicized Lucida Handwriting for Ghost Memories* and ***Italicized Bold Lucida Handwriting for Letters.***)

Chapter One: Introduction

Literary Métissage

This thesis is a heart centered literary métissage, a braiding together of different pieces of writing in which I explore and reflect upon memories of conversations I had with my father about God and war more than thirty years ago. I approached the memories from several angles in the hopes of revealing new dimensions of truth. This approach called for more than one type of writing. I have used personal journal entries, my researcher's notebook, poems, letters, and something I have called *Ghost Memories* where I recall the particular conversations I had with my father.

As I wrote about the conversations, I revisited the memories in detail. Time after time I had new experiences of my father. It was as though his ghost was walking through the past to guide me on this journey. This recalls Roland Barthes' explanation of an intense personal experience while viewing a photograph which he called a *punctum*. Long after his mother died he was gazing at a photo of her. He had an awareness of her when he was younger along with his continued awareness of her death (as cited in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 89). My experience while writing was often much like this idea of a *punctum*, however, instead of a photograph, words and visuals in my mind were the precipitators. These pieces of writing are my *Ghost Memories*. On the days that I wrote the *Ghost Memories*, I felt the presence of my father in a very real sense.

As I set out on this journey, my goal was to find a way to tell the stories of my conversations with Dad that would bring him honour. This goal was attached to the hope that as I was writing these stories, I would come closer to experiencing the love of God. In my spiritual

life, I had always known the love of God but I was certain that I was not enjoying the full experience of that love. My thoughts were that because my earthly father had been distant, I had seen my heavenly father as distant. This distance between God and I was constructed out of a misinterpretation. Perhaps the distance between Dad and I was too. As I explored this terrain I hoped I might come to a new place of knowing Dad's love and understanding him, and maybe this could lead me to a new experience of God's love.

What would typically be referred to as research questions in other forms of qualitative research are my paths of inquiry. The first path of inquiry involves the conversations I had with my father so long ago. The second path revolves around my desire to have a more complete experience of God's love. The third path is centered on my search for identity. These paths of inquiry with which I began were borne out of prayer and confirmed by prayer. I had felt compelled to write about the conversations with Dad for a long time, probably since they occurred. I wanted to write since that time but had felt inadequate to the task. I was afraid that my writing would not be good enough. That still concerns me, but now I am much more concerned with the process of writing and what life writing brings to me as a person. I began this work at the age of forty-six: it was my first sustained attempt at creative writing. To have the strength to approach the blank page with wavering courage I needed to steep myself in faith, so I began each day in prayer. I asked God to bless my work and help me achieve a divine purpose in my work. During many days I intensely felt the presence of God around me.

As shown in the table of contents, I have used a different font for each type of writing to help the reader see the different genres or threads of my weaving. (I include myself here as the first and perhaps most important reader). Perhaps I could have written some of my ghost

memories as poems or journal entries, yet the choices were made with an eye to suit the content to the form. There was no precise guide for this, merely intuition and trial and error. The form and process of literary *métissage* works well with such a weaving of genres (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009).

Praxis is described by Schwandt (2007) as “a form of activity that has to do with the conduct of one’s life... It is about doing the right thing and doing it well in interactions with fellow humans...bound up with the kind of person that one is and is becoming” (p. 242). The praxis of literary *métissage* calls for a particular kind of reflexivity which offers fertile ground for transformation. “Through writing autobiographically, teachers and researchers constitute their lives and mobilize their identities in ways they otherwise might have not: through the act of writing autobiographically, they continually face who they have been and who they are becoming...” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009, p. 34). There are several stories included which reveal the young girl I was. These are important as they have helped reveal more of my selves to the writer, reader and researcher that I am now. Without these stories, I may not have been able to see how I was still holding onto labels from the past. Had I not seen that, I might not have realized how these old identities were still shaping how I viewed myself in the present and how they affected my interpretation of the conversations with my father. There are many gifts in life writing, one of the richest is the self transformation which begins during the process of writing. As I wrote these stories of my selves and reflected, I was presented with truths which changed my selves in the present. This flexibility of self was a huge gift to me from Métis.

Literary Métissage and the Ontological Pertinence of Stories of the Self

“Métissage is a praxis based on the personal serving to shape a space for the articulation of new visions of the self in ways that bypass traditional hierarchies and dichotomies” (Harb, 2008, para. 8). It is this “articulation of new visions of the self” that I refer to when I mention my selves instead of myself. I am becoming aware of how disparate the versions of Donna are as I inhabit my various roles. This has not been a comfortable discovery even though I know it is part of the human condition.

As the prime critical reader of my own work, I had to deal with my desire to be a strong writer. Yet this was the beginning of my writing life and I knew it would take time to evolve my voice to match my aspirations. I needed to remember the words of Carl Leggo who sagely advises when asked if a poem is good, answers instead with the question, “What is it good for?” (2004a, p.1). Among other things, this writing has been good for helping me articulate new visions of self.

As Harb (2008) indicates, traditional hierarchies, such as in a father-daughter relationship in a culture as entrenched in patriarchal patterns as Prince Edward Island, affect our ideas of self. I knew I needed to bypass this hierarchical aspect of the relationship between me and my father. I needed the flexibility which métissage offers to allow the space to explore who I was then, who I am now, and who this whole process is helping me to become. This is why I have included stories about my younger self. These stories give context to the young girl I was at that time and the conversations she had. They illuminate how she was experiencing life; in that way they are ontologically pertinent. They also show more of what she brought into that space she shared with her father. So, by considering these stories, the reader may have a deeper understanding of who

that person was who had those profound exchanges with her father. That understanding was very important for me as a reader of my own text.

I was continually reading and rereading as I wrote and reflected. This was the way that the process of life writing started to open me to change. It opened me to change in the present and the future, but it also miraculously took me back to the past in an entirely new way. I was able to consider the past differently than I had before because of the shifts in identity. With honest eyes, I was able to approach the memories and be open to new and triumphant versions of the past.

Literary Métissage and the Third Space

According to a Biblical viewpoint, we are created by and sustained by God. “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28. New American Standard Version). As God is to us, so is the third space the origin and sustenance of literary métissage. It is in the third space where literary métissage ‘lives and moves and has (its) being’. This third space exists outside of a dichotomous perspective. It is in leaving this either/or way of looking at life and self that I became free to leave behind old patterns that were not working for me. It was not just the father-daughter power structure I had to see beyond, I had to be able to think outside of the parameters of what is taught in the churches I have attended. The churches have certainly affected my vision of my self and my interpretation on my past. Without the freedom that came as a result of playing with poetry, letter writing, ghost memories, straight narratives, and journal entries, I do not know how I would have been able to see the past in a new way and see triumph in the time I

spent with Dad. All along there was a feeling of de facto failure attending my memories because I never got Dad to go to church. This changed. My experience in writing was experimental and on a good writing day, it had the loose and free feel of play. With a wider perspective that came out of the literary play, I was able to gain a beautiful victory and peace in knowing that I brought great love to Dad. In addition to that gift and the peace it brings, I am hopeful that the writing exploration has enlarged my heart for hearing again from others in my life.

The Quest

A long time ago, I set out on a quest. I set out to tell the story of conversations I had with my father about war when I was very young. These conversations affected me profoundly. I wanted to tell a story of my father, not his whole life story, or even a complete linear story of the years that I am writing about. I have concerned myself solely with what seemed necessary to tell this story: this proved to be an arduous, painful, and wonderful task.

When I began writing, people recommended books about the Second World War and certain avenues of research. They assumed that I wanted to tell the complete story of my father's time overseas. I was sidelined for quite a while pursuing my father's history, and earnestly interested in everything I could learn. I sent away for his war records and tried to find out information about his time overseas. Yet it became clear to me that those stories were extraneous to what I truly wanted to learn about. What I wanted was to pursue the stories which I had within myself. They were my memories. There existed no outside authority with which to refer.

Therefore, this is not the place to look if you want to know what battles my father fought

in, how old he was when he was first in combat, or other details from his time overseas at the end of the Second World War. If I tried that, I realized that with the unreliability of memory I would likely state certain things as fact and later hear from family that I had gotten it wrong. “Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half remembered events...[T]hey arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events” (Zinsser, 1998, p.6). I realized there was not going to be a text that my whole family could look at and say, “Ah, that is Dad.”

A literary *métissage* of stories about my father was spoken on Remembrance Day, 2010. Our stories braided together as each person spoke about him, from the heart, telling stories about him in the garden, about him scaring off boyfriends, or his deadpan humour. For many of us, they were stories which had been heard before. There was an ancient feel to this as we stood around and everyone spoke their stories of Dad.

In the beginning, I hoped to do something with the conversations we had so long ago that would bring honour to Dad. I had wanted to write about them for a long time. So the road ahead seemed straight and the view was clear. As I wrote and explored new ways of writing, I kept a researcher’s notebook. It is a tool used to aid the researcher in keeping track of things as the research is done. Yet my researcher’s notebook did much more than this; it was where I explored my thoughts and feelings about my memories and my continuing life. Where these two paths merged was the pivot point to much of the personal transformation which had begun. This was the site of reflexive writing that proved to be so helpful in creating new ways of viewing my past and my present, my self and others. The process of writing and reflecting became very messy and suddenly the road that was straight became steep and curvy. I am surprised by the places I

have been and the way this journey has changed me and opened me to further change. The curves in the road have proven to be as important as the straight parts.

Literary Métissage: The Representational Form

I take my stories and lay them down next to each other. They speak for themselves. They also resound off each other as they connect and collide. Weaving between the stories, poems, journal entries and researcher's notebook entries may take every reader and each reading to a different place of meaning. According to Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo (2009), this is the way of literary métissage, where stories, usually written by different people, are braided together in the belief that their truths will offer something new to the reader that they could not offer alone. These authors provide an explanation of the origins of literary métissage. The term reclaims the word métis and redeems it from its pejorative use, meaning half breed. Métis was the first love and wife of Zeus; she was a shapeshifter, and literary métissage offers the hope of transformation. Métissage is also derived from the Latin mixticius, which means the weaving of cloth from different fibres. So this form of writing is a braiding together of stories to create one whole which is then offered up to the reader. The readers then perform the unique function of bringing themselves and their stories to the work as they make sense of what is written (pp. 35, 36).

Life Writing and Literary Métissage: An Ethos for Our Times (2009) provides a creative groundwork for literary métissage within which the authors braid their own stories on common themes. In my work I have braided the stories of the several different selves which make up who

I have been, who I am and some new ones that are who I am becoming in the writing. I also braided together the different genres of writing I used to get at deeper levels of truths in my stories. Each time I wrote, I would peel back another layer and see more.

Life writing is transformative (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo, 2009), and it has begun transformation in me. In the Hasebe-Ludt (2009) collection, the writers hope that their work braided together will bring a new truth to the reader where their stories resound with similarities or differences, each experience being honoured by the writer and the reader (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo, 2009, p. 35). Métissage calls for those who engage with it to allow the dissonances and the similarities to exist side by side and interpret the juxtapositions without referring back to a linear model or one that is hierarchical or uniform in an effort to explain those juxtapositions away. It is important to remember that each writer is also a reader of her own text. As I wrote and read my own text, truths popped out at me in the way a colour will against a contrasting background. Other insights came to me out of a similarity between my way of seeing in the past and my way of seeing in the present. This supports a praxis which accepts differences. Métissage both pays attention to difference and creates something new. It “addresses the past while imagining new relations and solidarities” (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 142).

Lenses: Identity

In my writing it is as though I were looking through a lens; that lens being my self, or as it turns out, my selves. Through the process of writing, reading and reflecting on my stories, the lens changed. It became obvious to me that I had several lenses and various selves. The process

of gazing inward and then outward and back inward again initiated a process of redefining my selves, the different aspects of me that are represented in my various roles. Throughout this text I will refer to my selves in an effort to remember this learning and also to remind the reader of its import.

This research, or inquiry, which used the researcher's selves as the lens through which to observe the data, is by nature an intimate and sometimes uncomfortable work. I am the lens through which I explore conversations I had with my father about war when I was a young teenager. The lens is biased and warped. As much as possible, I would like to make those biases clear, yet I know I do not see all of the things that cloud my lens or even what it is made of. For that, I await further illumination.

I am a Christian; that is how what I believe is normally described, although I find the word uncomfortable because of how it has been misused over time. What the word means to me is decidedly different than what it has meant in church circles and certainly different from what it has meant to me in the past. I am pursuing a relationship with God and Jesus through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In this past year of working on my thesis, my relationship with both persons has become more real. This is a significant change from what I have believed for as long as I can remember. I am a writer, yet I have really just started to write with this thesis. I am a mother of one child, Olivia. My mothering of Olivia is a great source of meaning and joy for me. I am a teacher, yet I am uncomfortable with parts of my role as teacher. I became a teacher because of my discomfort with the school system and I wished to make the experience different for my students. The process of this deep life writing has caused me to review my teaching, and to evaluate my teaching of the writing process from the new lens of a life writer. I approach my writing from the viewpoints of my different selves. As I continue with life writing, I expect that I

will be able to develop and grow into a more continuous self. I hope to be able to work out some of the discontinuity between the different roles I have taken on. “The act of creating new mixed forms, stronger and more resilient than the existing ones, gives métissage its generativity in the face of difference and thus its power to reconfigure the past, to transform the present, and to imagine otherwise (Rushdie, 1991, cited in Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009, pp. 35, 36). In my praxis, métissage has led to a clearer view of how dissonant I am in my various roles. This consciousness which has come from the writing offered the possibility of change. I choose now to move towards a more continuous self while accepting the necessities of my different roles. More harmony is the result.

Leggo (2009) sees life writing as a way to find out more about ourselves. In this way, my writing has been deep research. I have dealt with the biggest issues, the heaviest weight, and gone after the biggest prizes that I could imagine. I needed to see who I was in the whole series of interchanges between Dad and myself. I could not have verbalized that at the beginning of my writing journey. Leggo (2009) illuminates life writing as deep research into the self or selves. “We often write about family, always seeking to know who we are, to gain a clear sense of identity and positionality in the midst of memory, desire, heart, and imagination, especially in relation to others” (p. 152). When I was younger I looked at the world as a Christian, a sister, a seeker of truth and a devout believer in love. Now when I look at the world, I see things as a person following Jesus, a mother, a writer, a teacher, a sister, a daughter, a friend, a seeker of truth, and a devout believer in love. Oh yes, and as a daughter of a man who was sad and silent and spoke to me of war. Have those conversations and the questions they raised ever left me?

Poetry

I have used the poetic space to explore aspects of my memories that seemed to need another set of rules, different parameters, even different elements than straight story telling would have. In *The Craft, Practice, and Possibility of Poetry in Educational Research*, Cahnmann-Taylor (2009), uses the following analogy to explain this difference: “[J]ust as the microscope and the camera have allowed different ways for us to see what would otherwise be invisible, so too, poetry and prose are different mediums that give rise to ways of saying that might not otherwise be expressed” (p. 16).

My first and second poems, “Threshold” and “The Truth,” deal with the issue of trying to communicate something that is difficult to put into words, such as the deep experience of sharing between my father and myself. I explored this in straight narrative form and there seemed to be too many words and not enough truth, though narrative is also poetic and can deal with emotional and spiritual issues. In the end, I hope that my narratives begin to do this. But as I began, I felt locked in the reification of my stories. I needed to play in a new realm. I had been journaling for many years but had always shied away from poetry. I think I would have been stuck in a pedantic viewpoint in a similar way if I had been writing poetry for years but never journaling. I needed the help of a new key to shift from a linear, intellectual perspective to a non linear, emotional viewpoint. So I picked up poetry. According to Butler-Kisber and Stewart (2009), poetry allows for this change in approach: “[P]oetry allows the heart to lead the mind rather than the reverse” (p.3). This leading of the mind by the heart has persisted throughout and informed all of my research. This is what I am hoping for in my work: that the reader will read with the heart leading the mind. I hope that the emotional life and the soul of the reader will open

up to my words, to the world which I offer up.

Poetic inquiry is, among other things, a way of collecting data, working with the data and reporting the data through poetry. Brady (2009) gives further clarity to the need for a poetic approach:

[P]oetic processes can be used both as tools of discovery and a unique mode of reporting research, that there are activities and domains of participation in life that can *only* be accounted for realistically with qualitative methods, with poetic-mindedness, thereby further opening the door to bricolage and a commitment by many social science and educational researchers to plural methods as the wave of the future (p. xiii).

So the poetic way of seeing is inherently open to different takes on the same theme and this multiplicity of views allows for transformation. As Dark (2011) explains, “we need to sharpen our abilities to reframe often – to practice divergent thinking: the ability to cast ideas about one thing in multiple ways” (para. 3). Through poetry and poetic inquiry, I have been able to ask questions that would not otherwise have arisen. I have been able to explore parts of my experience which were sensed more with the spirit than the intellect. That has been crucial in being able to go back in new ways and to be able to see differently once I got there.

Poetry offers a glimpse at the real magic of life. As John Steffler writes, “[P]oetry approximates, through the powerful use of language, our fundamental, original sense of life’s miraculousness, its profound and mysterious meaning” (cited in Leggo, 2004b, p. 6). Indeed, without a choice to embrace the poetic way of seeing, I would not have been open to fully experiencing the beauty in my re-searching of the past.

Chapter Two: The First Threads of Inquiry

Poem #1: Threshold

How can I tell you what I am telling you?
How can you hear what I am going to say?
How can you ever know the sadness in his eyes?
Or feel the heavy pauses between words?
Something so beyond words.
Even now, as I begin to write about this, so many years later,
My heart groans and cracks
Imagining the weight of what he carried.
Go back to the kitchen doorway. Go back.
Stand on the threshold, hear the hum of heaven.
The room is glowing with the light of the sunset,
Just beyond the reach of the window.
This would be the space for such sharing.

Memory and Healing: Going Back to Go Forward

“I want to emphasize the energy of memory and emotion and spirit. Life writing is not so much about reviewing as previewing, not so much about looking back as looking forward. Life writing is about hope and seeking health” (Leggo, 2001, p. 1).

“A life is a puzzle to be decoded, but it is not a solution to the puzzle that one is after; it is an unlayering of the depths of the puzzle so that its mystery can be revealed. I think of the Spanish verb *recordar*, to pass back through the heart” (Sullivan, 1995, p. xiv).

As I let this time with my father pass back through my heart, my desire is for the truth of the moment to be told in a way that brings honour and compassion to my father and those who, like him, return from war with pieces missing. I want to bring healing and hope to the people they return to. I trust that it will bring further healing and hope to myself. As I tread this familiar path once more, I know that it will take me to new places. This is the magic of memory. Sometimes remembering is like any adventure, the destination may be known but perhaps not the exact route, and chaos is a welcome traveling companion for the journey. I hope to hear my father anew. I hope to assure myself that I listened, that he was heard and maybe learn more in the rehearing.

The life writing which I have undertaken about my father is in part in the scriptural tradition of Lamentations. In the Canadian Oxford Dictionary a lament is defined as: “1. a passionate expression of grief. 2. a poem of mourning or sorrow” (Barber, 2004). I want to clarify that I do intend to let the passion of my grief for what my father experienced be felt by the reader, indeed, this is my prayer. In the tradition of the Irish keeners who wail and mourn for extended periods of time when someone dies, I want it to be known that not only was his death mourned, but also that what he lost when he went to war has been properly lamented in love. At this point I can hardly apologize for being a “bleeding heart” in my poetry, or too personal. I will go in the other direction and ask that my readers join me as they read my poems of mourning and sorrow and lament against what was lost.

These are my hopes for others: for my father, for other veterans and for their children. I can hardly say what I hope for myself except that I know I must write my way through this time, and these conversations. I know this in a new way since reading what other writers have said

about the necessity to write about one's own themes. One thing I do know now, and only now, at the last stages of my writing, is that by going over the events and words, spaces and silences shared by my father and myself, more of the mystery of my own life has been revealed.

And yet I know, as Sullivan (1995) highlights, the mystery will remain. I need to accept that. I think I do. As that great philosopher and cartoon hero, Bugs Bunny sang, "Oh sweet mystery of life at last I've found you," there was always the hope that finding the mystery was indeed like solving a puzzle. But it is not. The experience is more that I recognize the import of what it is I am looking at. It has an ineffable, unsolvable nature. This mystery has passed through my heart as I walk on. Only now there is a clear light surrounding the path.

The Search for Truth

Again I turn to Carl Leggo (2005) to support my steps. He describes how we write autobiographically in order to know and be known. I seek to know my story and my father's story in a new way. I seek to pick up some new insight as I go back to this place in my memory. According to Leggo (2005), a second reason we write autobiographically is to become. This resonates strongly with me. I know that as I have written about these events and emotionally relived them several times in the rewriting, I have changed and I am in the process of becoming. This picks up the thread of my third path of inquiry where I am involved in the process of surrendering who I am to discover who I am meant to be. I am re-envisioning the past with a selective eye, one that wishes to choose the good out of what passed between my father and me. This re-envisioning has given me a chance to redefine not only who I was, but who I am now and

who I will be.

We write to reveal the truth of who we are, not necessarily the precise encyclopedic truth, but the essential truth of who we are in the world we are trying to understand. So we write about the world the way we see it. This risks the displeasure of those who people our world, but we must do it (Leggo, 2004, p.13).

Indeed, for the huge reward of becoming able to see who we are in the world, it is worth the price of risking offending some readers. The life writer must be brave.

Literary Métissage and Inner Truth

In this work, my epistemological and ontological perspectives (my way of knowing and my way of being in the world) are consistent with my methodology. Literary métissage calls for a researcher who is both reflective, that is to say, “given to deep thought or long and careful consideration” (Barber, 2004) and reflexive, in so far as one is concerned with oneself.

Throughout the writing of my thesis, as I explored reflectively and reflexively, I came to a new place of confidence in my epistemology. It was wonderful to reread my stories and poems and find that as the process continued, my chosen poetic way of knowing had gained credence with myself. I had come to reframe my way of ascertaining what was true. What was true was now determined more within myself than without.

As a researcher, I would like to confess that I am struggling to maintain this new way of knowing. I am also fighting to hold onto the poetic way of being that has only begun to come to me in writing. I need to work at keeping both of these changes because when Métis brought them to me she had healing in her other hand. Métissage has provided a way for me to make meaning

out of my past and has also left the door open to the reader to come with her own past, her own ways of being and knowing, her own approach to the text, and to make her own meaning.

Donna's Stories: The Legendary Willard Wigmore

The garden was littered with girls. My sisters and I were working to finish planting the vegetables for Dad. Dad was overseeing our work, stopping here and there to tell us when we had to redo something again and showing us how. I had carrot seed duty. Do you know how annoyingly small those seeds are? I had done them the year before and I knew that somebody, probably me, was going to have to come back and thin them out later. So, I planted carefully. I wanted to improve on last year's work. "I got a worm, five more cents." Candy hollered out. Linda said, "I'm done my row, I'm going down to check out the tide." When we were done we were heading down to the river. It was hot and we were counting on a swim to cool us off. I got another worm and calculated how much of each of my favourite penny candies I could get at Mel's. One more nickel and I'd have enough for a jaw breaker, but then that would be it, I'd just have the one candy. It was such an investment, I hardly ever got one. But I was still considering it as Linda came back with good news. "The tide is high right now, it's up to the bank!" Dad said, "It'll get extra high these days because of the full moon. It'll stay in good longer, too. We'll finish up." Dad was busy with making the last rows, where the corn would go. Thank God, finally we were done and we all took off in a stream of laughing children, stripping off our outer layers as we ran through the field of wild flowers that led to the river. The Queen Anne's lace and grass was high, it brushed against our bodies as we ran down the path.

The tide was so high that we dove in right from the bank. That had maybe only happened once in my entire lifetime. That afternoon Dad came swimming with us, something he didn't normally do. After she had her fill of swimming, Mom sat on the bank and played with the baby. She swiveled her head as we all called out to her, "Mom! Look at me! Did you see that!?" "Mom, watch me do a somersault in the water!" "Mom, watch me swim all the way out to the raft under water from here!" "Yes, yes, I see you. Very good. Oh, boy, you're doing great!" she said. Then I heard her talking to Dad. "Oh, Willard. You're not going to do that just because Mr. Joseph said he didn't think you could!" "Don't worry, Maudie. It'll be alright." And he was off. Mom stood up on the bank, settled Carl on her hip, and fixed her worried eyes on Dad. "Oh dear, Willard." "What's going on, Mom?" Ellen was up out of the water and talking to Mom. Candy was swimming right alongside Dad until he said for her to turn around, it was getting too deep. Ellen came back to us with the news. "Dad is swimming across the river!" "Oh my Gosh!" "No!" "We have to stop him!" As if anyone could catch up to him now, he was already way over his head and that was an awful lot over our heads. If we could catch him anyway, who could ever tell Dad what to do? Gordie said, quite coolly, "He's so tall he'll probably walk half the way." So we watched our father swim across the river, after a while he was just a dot, could have been a seal or a bird. When he returned, man, we were impressed. Mom was smiling. "That's your father, children, I guess Mr. Joseph isn't right all of the time."

Researcher's Notebook, (N.D.): My Father's Identity

There is much about my father that is known. First of all, he was a silent man who

drank on the weekends. Many people know this and still hold him in their hearts with respect. They know that whenever he was asked about his time overseas he would say, "The less said about that the better." And there is much that cannot be known. As I write, I reflect on much of what Dad and I shared in conversation as personal information. So as I share this information, my prayer is that it may be helpful to people who grew up as children of veterans. I hope that it might bring a deeper understanding of their parent's experience.

There is much about my father's experience that I wish I knew; many things I wish I remembered more clearly. In reading Shoptalk by Donald Murray, his collection of quotes from writers and his ponderings on autobiographical writing (1990), I was led to an article he wrote on life writing entitled All Writing is Autobiography (2009). From here, I was led to his column, Now and Then, in the Boston Globe (August, 1998 – September 2009). What I read here introduced me to a different Donald Murray. Here he wrote of his experience in combat and his issues with civilian life after the war. Murray wrote about some of the huge themes that my talks with Dad centered on. For the things that were lacking in my memories with Dad, my heart, my imagination, my intellect all soared at the thought of meeting Donald Murray. He wrote that he could not talk over his experience with his daughters. My plan was to interview this man and braid his life stories in with my father's. But Donald Murray, may he rest in peace, died in 2007. I was disappointed to be unable to connect with him, but since I saw such hope in that connection, I decided to include this man as a correspondent of sorts. Donald Murray wrote a lot about his time in combat and reflected on how the experience affected him. He wrote about things that I wanted to talk to my father about, such as how he felt on the battlefield with all of the corpses around him, what it was like to be in constant

danger and what it was like to kill. So I included in this text letters that I wrote to Donald Murray, and in his fictional reply he speaks about topics that Dad never talked about.

Letter #1 to Donald M. Murray

Dear Donald Murray,

*Last night I was reading your paper, *All Writing is Autobiography* (1990). Dear Sir, there was so much in your writing that resonated with me, especially your idea that all writing that we do tells our story in some way or another: either by the things we write about, the words we use, the words we invent, the way we phrase things and maybe most importantly, the way we see things. These all communicate to others who we are, where we've been, and the place we occupy in the world of ideas. I felt I had a rich resource in my hands before I was very far into your paper.*

Then you said we all have only so many stories. You quote Willa Cather and a few others, you say we get these stories by such an early age that the rest of the life of a writer is spent reflecting on them. Your list of themes which you write about is the same as mine. I am writing about talks that I had with my father many years ago about war and God. When I got to the part where you write about your experience in war and your return to civilian life afterwards, I realized you were filling in gaps that were left in my talks with my father.

So may I take this liberty? May I write to you, since I think you have something that I lack and need?

Yours truly,

Donna Wigmore

daughter of a veteran

Personal Journal Entry, (N.D.): How Can I Tell You What We Didn't Say?

I am wondering about my conversations with Dad. I am reluctant to start, and this is more than the chronic writer's block / procrastination combination. My concern is that I won't have enough to write about. Also, that it will be beyond me to share in words what Dad and I shared. I am cursing myself for not having kept a diary. I wish I could remember exactly what he said, how I responded, how I ever got the nerve to approach him about why he didn't go to church. It would be so good to go back to a journal and read it all and what was happening around the times of those conversations.

But how can I ever tell you what we didn't say? How can you ever understand the vocabulary of silences and the way truth filled the air?

Poem #2: The Truth

*The truth came out of your mouth
and mine
but each word we said fought against the other's
hearts straining to be understood, to be heard
listening for a place where our lines could intersect*

Revised from Researcher's Notebook, (N.D.): A Vocabulary of Silences

In "A Heartful Pedagogy of Care: A Grandfather's Perambulations," Carl Leggo (2009), writes about the significance of silences and how there can be no language without silences. In my writing, I have considered carefully the silences that were shared between my father and myself. There were spaces in between the words where much was shared. The weight of what was communicated in those spaces was real and felt by both of us, experienced at the same time. I hold this as sacred, yet I feel the need to share it. I hope that a reader who can sit and be with a difficult truth may be able to understand the kind of truth I am talking about. The truth communicated in the silences between words.

I experienced silence in another way with my father at the end of his days. He had cancer and was on his deathbed. His left lung had been removed five years before this and then he suffered a relapse. We had all counted the five years and were optimistic about Dad being free from the cancer. When he relapsed I remember he was walking through the kitchen when one of his legs just gave out on him. It looked so strange, this strong man almost falling down in front of us all. He hadn't been drinking. He went to the hospital and a large brain tumor was found. Dad was told he had two weeks to live.

I sat with my father as he lay there in the hospital. I prayed. I thought about how it was written that if you pray, believing, you would receive what you prayed for, within the will of God. So I prayed and trusted that God would certainly will for this man to be given some more time. He had found peace and joy for the first time since before he had seen combat. Dad had gone to Alcoholics Anonymous and had found relief from his addiction. I imagine that he may have also found some peace with God as well. The beauty of this was that these two things

gave Dad the ability to be present. But not to me, his child. It seemed it was too late or the walls that had been built up were too thick, but he was present to two grandchildren who were born in his early years of sobriety. The sun rose and set on Dad's shoulders for these boys and I saw such joy on the face of my father when he was with them. We got to watch Dad be happy; to love and be loved. It was a sight to behold. Even now, twenty-six years later, my heart is lightened with this image. I give thanks for the love they shared.

So while I prayed, I sat with my father, thinking he wasn't really there. As different parts of his brain were being attacked by the cancer he was gradually losing different functions and he was asleep most of the time. I held his hand sometimes while I sat. But outside of the conversations Dad and I had when he was drinking, there was no open communication, so it seemed normal to sit with him and not talk. It wasn't as if there would be a flowing conversation if he were awake.

For the better part of two weeks, I sat with my father while he lay dying, me denying that and hoping. I would get off work from Cedar's Eatery and find some lilacs to pilfer on my bike ride over to the hospital. The scent would fill the room like the presence of God, another element of my relationship with my father, always the unseen third presence. (The humour of stolen flowers bringing God to mind seems as alive as the scent was itself.)

Researcher's Notebook, (N.D.): I Can't Write.

I am so hesitant to put these stories down on paper. I feel uncertain about my ability to write. It is a continual inner dialogue, back and forth: I can do it. No, I can't. What a horrible

waste of time to be just beginning to write at the age of forty-six. I remember wanting to write when I was ten, and being afraid of my sisters' reactions. I was afraid that my writing would never be good enough for them, that I would never earn their praise, and they were the ones who I most wanted it from. I still want it most from them. We share a certain literary appreciation, we like a lot of the same writers. I can imagine what my work will be like when I will be completely satisfied with it. At that point it might be to their liking. Yet I know I may not reach that level with my writing for a while, if ever.

When I was little, my brothers and sisters made fun of me and called me dumb and clumsy. Teasing me was a great sport for them. I heard that I was dumb so often I accepted it as a fact and have only recently realized that this label is still with me. Now I am scared that when they read my stories they will feel confirmed in their childhood assessment of me.

Poem #3: One More Silence - Dumbness

*I grew up believing I was dumb
 I thought I fought my way out of that
 Came to recognize it was just a slot I fell in
 So people would have a place for me
 I tried to recreate my intellect
 Redefine what is mine
 Yet, trying to write and not being able to use the words I feel inside
 I see they succeeded better than they may have wished
 My words won't come until this label is removed*

*This word has such power
If I am dumb.
I cannot speak,
I cannot write, which is speaking
If I can write.
I am not dumb because I am speaking
I am writing my way out of dumbness*

Revised from Researcher's Notebook, August 20, 2009: Compassion and Truth

I want to be both truthful and compassionate. I want to convey the richness of who Dad was and not some stock weekend-alcoholic that any actor could play. I worry about his brothers and sisters and how they might feel when reading about Dad in my writing. It might upset them to read that I feel we missed out on a lot of fathering because of Dad's brokenness. Dad's family is stoic. I remember at Dad's funeral, I was crying and literally bowled over by my grief, and Aunt Myrtle told me to pull myself together, that my father would not want to see me like that. I love and respect my Aunt Myrtle; she has been the head of the Wigmore family ever since Grampy and Nana died. I am closer to her than anyone else on Dad's side of the family. Aunt Myrtle never married, so when Grampy had his stroke and had to spend the rest of his days in a wheelchair, Aunt Myrtle was the one who took care of him. And she took care of them both in their final years. I had a chance to get to know her and love her on a deeper level when I went to stay with them when Nana was bedridden. Aunt Myrtle is our Grand Matriarch even though she never had any children. So it took courage for me to say to her, "I

don't think you're right. I think Dad would want to see us crying. I think if we didn't, he would come and haunt us until we really grieved for him." So yes, this family would have difficulty with me sharing my emotional experience as Dad's daughter.

Donna's Stories: Donna Messer Rides Again!

Birthdays were always celebrated with the whole neighborhood, everyone would come over and help you sing Happy Birthday and help you eat your cake. You wouldn't get a present from everyone though. I remember waiting in the bathroom while Mom decorated my cake. We weren't allowed to see it before it was finished, we weren't even allowed to know what shape Mom had decided to make for us until it was all done. A kitty cat or a car or a snowman?

This one year, for Carl's birthday, Mom and Dad decided it was warm enough for us to go out to Nana and Poppy's cottage in Victoria. So we all piled into the Volkswagen van and headed out. I was sitting on a pile of blankets and stuff right beside the car- cake that Mom had made for Carl. We were singing "I'm Henry the Eighth I Am" and quite enjoying putting on the thick British accents so that Henry sounded more like Enery when we went over a big bump and I landed right on top of the cake. I still remember the squishy feel of birthday cake all over my legs. Donna Messer rides again!

Revised from Researcher's Notebook, Saturday, August 29, 2009

I keep thinking about The Glass Castle, by Jeannette Williams, (2006). I appreciated

*the flow of her stories. It seemed to me like the stories just came to her, one after the other and she wrote them in that order. She wrote the stories very simply and unsentimentally. Her style is elegant. Again, I am left thinking about the question of how much of what might be embarrassing to certain family members to include. That question never leaves me. In *The Glass Castle*, I can't imagine that there was anything left out, but hers was a more catastrophic story. Does that make sense? I can't tell the bad stuff in mine because it wasn't as bad as hers? That sounds ludicrous. But it seemed from the very start that she was setting out to tell the whole story, whereas in mine, I am trying to capture certain truths and not aiming at being comprehensive.*

*I read from *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg (1998) today. Judith Guest writes in the foreword that she found this quote, "Do your work as well as you can and be kind," then she quotes Natalie Goldberg (1998), "Let the whole thing flower: the poem and the person writing the poem. And let us always be kind in this world" (p. xi). Both of these snippets are chastising me about wanting to write about how messy the house was and how drunk Dad got and how sad he was until he went to AA and Robbie and Matthew were born.*

*I am reading Lydia Davis's (2004) *The End of the Story*. It is intriguing how she writes about her loss of memory and how it isn't necessary for her to get all the details right.*

Sunday, August 30

*More about Lydia Davis: In *The End of the Story* she writes about trying to remember the order of events.*

I have tried to find a good order, but my thoughts are not orderly – one is interrupted by another, or one contradicts another, and in addition to that, my memories are quite often false, confused, abbreviated, or collapsed into one another (pp. 82, 83).

I could have written this about my own writing. I have tried to put things in chronological

order but I couldn't. I have made calls to my friend Diana, but I don't want to use anyone else's information. I realize that I don't need to. The stories are mine and there is no need for an encyclopedic memory. What I need, I have. My heart remembers what is important for this exploration.

I am aware that I will be able to tidy things up after I am done and more order will fall into place. But that will likely come from clues I have left in the stories, and they may not be historically accurate clues, but they might hold some truth. One memory will interrupt another, and I realize I am probably often writing in the way some of my students do - not enough detail, going off on bunny trails and other horrors. I don't want to make anyone unnecessarily sad. I need to figure out what is necessary for my own purposes. I need time to contemplate this.

Ghost Memory: The Conversation Begins.

Dad has been drinking. I can tell before he even comes into the house, he is staying so long in the car. Then, slowly, he opens the car door and continues to sit there for a while. Every movement slow and heavy. He walks to the front door and enters the house in silence until his foot touches the floor. Like lead, tired and dead. He walks like a ghost into the kitchen and sits at the head of the table.

I stand at the sink doing the dishes that have piled up. Twelve of everything, plus pots and pans and cookie sheets. Dirt gummed into the spaces in between the leaves of the table. The dirt and the dishes seem an insurmountable task to me, but I feel I have to make some headway, make some order out of this chaos. I came home from Young Peoples and

found the mess so jarring. The world of my home so hugely erratic, so different from the way things are at Young Peoples.

I know he has finally come in but I keep singing. I am going through the entire album of Linda Ronstadt's "Heart like a Wheel", and I am on the title track now. Some say the heart is just like a wheel, when you bend it, you can't mend it. I continue to sing, he might just be distracted enough to let me finish. But no, he comes out with one of the lines he is famous for: If you're singing for me you can stop anytime. What are you so goddamned happy about?

Well, that is a great conversation starter. I don't know, Dad. I had fun at Young Peoples.

You go to church far too often.

What is the matter with me going to church? Dad? Why is that a problem?

You make your mother feel bad, because you go and she doesn't.

Mom worked Saturday nights or Sunday days, just bad luck. So she could never be the one to take us to church on Sunday. Dad never went himself, I always wondered why. Why, if it was such a good place to go for us, and Mom wished so badly that she could go, did Dad not want to go? Ever. He would drop us off at Zion Presbyterian and then he would spend his Sunday morning his own way. We would enter the grand church and sit with everyone else while we sang and then we would be sent in different directions to our Sunday School classes. Meanwhile, Dad would be at Johnny's Mayfair. He would sit at the counter with Johnny. After church was over, if he wasn't there to pick us up, we knew where to find him. Then we would all get different things from Johnny's and make a chip salad to share. When we got home we would all spill out of the car, but not Dad. He sat there in the car with his little brown bag, his treat from Johnny's.

Why don't you ever go to church, Dad?

(I am so scared he is going to get really mad at me, but he has already gotten into it with telling me I go to church too much.)

Church? Why would I step inside a church?

To worship God. To learn about God.

Learn a pack of lies.

What do you mean, Dad? What lies?

He didn't answer. He didn't say a thing. He just looked at me, his eyes filled with this intensity. What it was I couldn't say.

Go back to your dishes, Donna. If I want you I'll dangle your chain.

He said this with a sad smile, to let me know he meant it affectionately. This was one of his most common affectionate refrains. I knew the subject was closed for the night, so I did as I was told and turned back to the dishes.

Chapter Three

Donna's Stories: Mermaids and Sea Creatures

Mom was smitten with things of the sea and the sea itself. She loved the river behind our house. If we were at the cottage at rocky Point or in Victoria at Nana and Poppy's cottage, both cottages were beside rivers. If you ever want to see a picture of bliss, look at Mom when she is in the water. She had seahorses on the wall in the bathroom and there was a picture of a mermaid somewhere. I never knew I had thought she was a mermaid until one afternoon I found out she wasn't. I was still so small that she swam with me on her back. She was in shallow water, taking me around the area in between the groves of sea weed. Her auburn hair was up in a bun and suddenly it started unraveling. Something about that made me see that she was the mermaid in my mind when I thought of mermaids. Her hair fell loosely out of the bun and I recognized I had somehow combined the two things. The mermaid's hair was down and I had rarely, if ever, seen Mom's hair down before. Seeing her hair down reminded me of the mermaid picture and I guess I could see then that they were two separate people.

The river belonged to us. It belonged to the neighborhood. In the winter Mom would get us all bundled up and take us tobogganing down the hill. If we went far enough we would have to be careful about going over the bank. That was the same hill that we tumbled down in the summertime, through the flowers and tall grasses on our way to swim. When we tobogganed we could often go as far as the river bank. It was often dark as we set out for the hill, but that never stopped us. The dark purple sky with stars twinkling as we slid on the white ground. We made up a song to sing as we went along, trundling down to the hill and back: Tobogganing, tobogganing, we go tobogganing, eve-ry day! Tobogganing, tobogganing, we go tobogganing,

all the way! I can still hear our voices ringing out in the cold winter air.

Even in the fall, the hill was a special place. We would go bird watching in The Woods. It was really just a stand of trees on the other side of Vista Street, the street behind our house that just sprang up while I was in grade school. The Woods stood separate from the houses. It looked like they had just forgotten to cut down those trees when they were getting the land ready to build on. But to us, it was enough. We made binoculars out of toilet paper rolls and made a thermos of hot chocolate and a few peanut butter crackers to sustain us and headed down to The Woods. After sitting in the trees for a while and waiting to see what exotic species we could spy, we would always exit the hill way, over to the left, avoiding the most direct route, which would be facing the new houses that had been built there. Somehow, the hill was a better endnote to our bird watching experience.

Later, when I was in my twenties, the city built a baseball diamond on the hill, and over to the right of our woods where our neighborhood playground was, they built a bigger baseball diamond. No one swam in the river any more. The neighborhood had gone through a number of years where there were no children. We were pretty sure the river was too polluted to swim in anyway. Still, it was a horrible offense to us that they dared to put the baseball diamonds there. We could never again go tumbling down that hill. Now when I take my daughter tobogganing there in the winter, there is no danger of us going as far as the river. Our tobogganing runs are much shorter now. The diamond is surrounded by a fence and we have to be careful not to bang into it. Whenever I hear "Pay paradise, put up a parking lot" (Mitchell, 1966), I think of the baseball diamond and a beautiful picture of the field, filled with brown eyed Susans, Queen Anne's lace, goldenrod and tall, tall grass comes rushing into my head and the image fills me up.

Donna's Stories: Noticed by my Absence

My father worked at Eaton's department store in shipping and handling. There was a neat half door to the room where he worked for people to come up and lean on and talk to him or the other men that worked there. It reminded me of the door in Ned the Talking Horse. My father could move the biggest things you could imagine. He was so strong. One time he took a broom stick in his hands, one hand at each end of the wooden part of it. He held it at knee height and jumped over it and back again. Then he snapped the broom in two. With his bare hands.

One day we were all shopping together. It must have been like a parade for all the people that worked there. I was the youngest, then Candy, Linda, Ellen, Joan, Gordie and Ivy. Judy and Bobby were too old to have to do anything with the whole family. And Carl hadn't appeared on the scene yet. Somehow, I got lost. I was the last in line and I was always straggling a bit - there were so many beautiful things to catch my eye. I looked around and around. I couldn't see one familiar face. What was going to happen to me? I wondered what I would do and I had no idea how I was going to find my family. I couldn't help crying, I was bawling so hard I couldn't make any noise when a lady came up to me and asked, "Are you lost little girl?" Finally I calmed down enough to be able to tell her that my father worked there and his name was Willard. Immediately, everything was okay. She took me to the big counter where people put in their orders from the Eaton's catalogue. Dad and Mom were standing there with my brothers and sisters. Everybody hugged me and it was all pretty exciting. We went home in the Eaton's van and when we got in, Dad opened up a big bag of Smarties someone had given him to give to me when I was found. We celebrated all the way home, eating chocolate and laughing. I felt so special because everybody was happy and it was all because of me.

Donna's Stories: The Three Little Pigs

Linda was just under 11 months older than Candy, and Candy was a year and three months older than me. We were dubbed The Three Little Pigs from the very beginning. We did everything together. We took baths together, got dressed together, brushed our teeth together, you name it. I remember one time we were in synch and managed to use the bathroom simultaneously. We must have been very little.

Mom would make us matching dresses. Linda got red, which looked very nice with her jet black hair and her big blue eyes, just like Dad. Candy got green to go with her green eyes. I still remember her in the green velvet dress Mom had made for her one Christmas. I would get blue, I had blue eyes too. We would say Red, red, pee the bed. Green, green, you're a queen. Blue, blue, God loves you. We would wear our velvet creations to the Zion Christmas concert where we would actually get to go and meet Santa and he would give us a bag of fudge in a little brown paper bag, just like the ones we would get our candy in at Mel's or Rashed's or the Candy Man's.

In the spring, Mom would make us light cotton dresses for Easter. I remember the seersucker material she used that had a lovely line of flowers going up and down it. The three of us traipsed over to Nana's in our dresses, feeling like flowers ourselves. Poppy made such a big fuss over us and daddled us on his knee singing, diddle, diddle dumpling my son John, went to bed with his stockings on, one shoe off and one shoe on, diddle, diddle dumpling, my son John. Poppy even put out the little fold-up lawn chairs for us. They had them since Mom, Aunt Neila

and Uncle Jock had been little. There were cement steps laid into the hill on Nana's and Poppy's yard. The Three Little Pigs took a pile of dandelions and scrubbed them over the surface of those steps until they were yellow. Yellow, yellow, kissed a fellow.

Donna's Stories: They Are Coming

In grade one, we heard about the Mi'kmaq people of Abegweit. To me, they sounded so beautiful. Their existence before we came along sounded like a dream. Living in teepees, canoeing, making dyes out of berries and plants. Their clothing was beautiful and I was enamoured.

One still summer afternoon, I was alone in the backyard. Everyone else had gone swimming and I had stayed behind. I think I had a bit of a fever. We had a cement block in the middle of the backyard that lay flat with the ground. As I sat there on this hot day, the air so calm you could almost hear the garden growing, I watched a pile of rejected crayons melt in the sun. Crayons were objects of great worth in our household. One year that's all I wanted for Christmas. My own package of crayons. I wouldn't have to share them with anyone. No one else could peel them or wear them down. That was really all I wanted. But nobody ever took me seriously. No one remembered when the crucial decisions were made. That Christmas morning I searched my pile, hoping to find the eight pack of Crayola, but they weren't there. I checked Candy's and Linda's piles as well to see if something had been misplaced, but there were no crayons.

My sisters and I spent a lot of time colouring. They would critique everything I did,

beginning with my colour choice. You're not going to use that blue for her dress are you? I think it looks way better when you outline everything in black. So we always ran out of black first. Blue and red were other favourites. So, in this pile of melting colour, there were only bits of blue and red and very little teeny weeny bits of black.

To the left of where I sat was our little playhouse and farther off was Boyyer's shed, where we would sometimes find Mi'kmaq arrowheads. There was a chokecherry bush beside the shed. We would dig around in the dirt until Mr. Boyyer told us to quit and then we would always eat chokecherries until our mouths got too tired of them. Somehow, the chokecherries always put us in mind of a song from music class. Cookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree, Counting All the Monkeys He Can See, Laugh Cookaburra, Laugh Cookaburra, That's No Monkey That's Me. Ha, Ha. So we sang it as we picked the fruit and munched along. Over to the right was our garden, and then the path that everyone had followed down to the river.

It was from that path that I heard or saw or felt something happening. It was like I was having a daydream, but not a daydream where you are aware you are making it up. It was very real. What was happening was a long boat of Mi'kmaq was coming down the river. They were silently gliding along, heading for the shore we swam from. I could see the line where we measured the tide to gauge when to go swimming. They were coming to get me. I wasn't scared. I wanted them to come and get me. I sat there, taking it all in, and then I drifted off to sleep beside the melted mass of wax.

Poem #4: Pain Had Fallen

Pain had fallen all around me

*Ugly mess everywhere
Bird droppings and torn feathers
Some kind of history with no kind of clue
I step carefully and reach out my arms
This curse of love hurts, but gives me a code
Feeling all this pain that isn't mine
My soul aches and comes close to shoulder the load*

Personal Journal Entry, (N.D.): A Dream

I had a dream I was flying. I began at my usual take off spot. I saw some daisies, and as I bent to pick them I saw a four leaf clover and picked it too and put them all in my pocket. My take off spot was at the edge of the garden just before the ground slopes down. This was ideal, I usually only had to flap my arms a bit and I was airborne. Normally I would careen around the neighborhood, go over to my best friend's place and see what was going on there. I liked practicing swooping around the trees in their yard. Stopping still scared me, but I was getting better, although I still usually had a tumble as I hit the ground.

Today was different. This was not to be a neighborhood tour. I had a sense of urgency as I flew to the river behind our house. It was a scorching hot day but I flew high anyway. Higher and higher, the heat getting more intense as I rose. The sun was flickering, although it was blasting out a terrible heat, there was something wrong with it. It was wobbling in its position. This was not good. I had to fix it. There was no one else around so it was up to me.

My skin was dry and hot. It was as if my whole body felt thirsty. My tongue was stuck

to the roof of my mouth. I tried to sing, "A Tisket a Tasket" to pass the time and calm myself but I couldn't make sounds that were very much like music. "A tisket a tasket, I lost my yellow basket. A little girlie picked it up and put it in her pocket." I just breathed out the words. Then I could only keep the tune going in my head, no breath left. I was so high up now the last bird I flew past was a tiny pepper spot below me. "And if she doesn't bring it back I think that I will die."

Finally I was there. I flew around the sun three times and threw my flowers and the four leaf clover at it and fell away from it. From a distance, I hovered and waited to see what happened. I watched as the sun wiggled and settled back into its place. Somehow I knew that it was going to be all right.

Victoriously, I descended, plummeting into the river, my singed skin hissing relief.

*Personal Journal Entry, (N.D.): My Mission: If Dad Won't Go to God, I'll Bring
God to Dad.*

Dad's silence and his drinking were a part of his sadness, I knew that. I carried it with me. It was a part of me. From the first time I heard about God, I carried God with me too. The first teaching was "What is God? God is love." This was followed by, "Where is God? God is everywhere." I must have been around five then, I would sit and think or lie awake at nights contemplating these ideas. If this were true then that would mean that love was everywhere, right? Then what about Dad's sadness?

This puzzle was something I had with me all the time, like a stone I kept in my pocket

to take out and feel the edges of from time to time. I know I wasn't aware of it as two ideas which couldn't be true at the same time, but I kept taking them out and experiencing their paradox. This kept me eagerly returning to the source. I loved going to church and when my best friend Diana invited me to her Vacation Bible School in the summer, I was glad to go.

Donna's Stories: Judy's Wedding

In the summer of the year that I was six, on August 22nd, my oldest sister Judy was married. She married a motorcycle driving, Beatles loving, blue eyed dreamboat. David Turpin was cool. I remember how busy Judy would get whenever he was coming over to pick her up for a date. She would vacuum and threaten to suck us up if we didn't move out of the way. Our polka dotted linoleum would be perfectly clean by the time her knight in shining armour came to sweep her away.

Judy wore a long, emerald green dress to a Formal she and Dave went to. She was so beautiful, sheathed in green and wearing white gloves that went up to her elbows. She had blonde hair and brown eyes. No one else in our family did. She was exceptional. Glamorous. Judy and Bobby were Mom's children from her first marriage. We never bothered calling them our half brother and sister. We were all the same, but they were separated from us by age from my earliest memory. It seemed like as soon as I was aware of them, they were on their way out, both ready to be married and have different lives.

For her wedding, she was going to let Candy and me be her train bearers. Linda was going to circulate the guest book. I loved Linda's outfit - she looked beautiful in it. They bought

Candy and me matching dresses. They were accordion pleated dresses. Mine was tight in the sleeves. Candy, as skinny as a twig, had lots of room in hers. We had headbands to match our dresses. Joan helped me to get ready, it was such an important day. My knees were not my best feature and Joan thought they looked dirty. I couldn't convince her that they were just that colour, so we scrubbed them until they were an entirely different colour of pink.

Candy looked perfect. It was so magnificent to see Judy in her gown with the long train behind it. We had just seen the dress recently all put together. Before that, it was all in pieces on Nana's living room floor. I watched Judy carefully iron pieces once again before she sewed them together. How excited we were to pick up the train of her beautiful white dress and carefully follow her down the aisle.

Donna's Stories: Cleanliness is Next to Godliness

For a while, Linda, Candy and I shared a bed while Joan and Ellen slept in a bunk bed in the same room. This was in the new house; I don't remember the sleeping arrangement we had in the pink house. Our curtains had images of ballet dancers spinning and leaping on them. There were at least four different positions for the ballerinas on the curtains. My eyes would wander over the dancers for a long time before I fell asleep. We would have to have quiet contests in order to get us all to stop talking. Usually it was Linda's idea and usually I would lose.

After a while, Ellen and Joan were allowed to move into the laundry room. They were to share the space with the washer and dryer. They painted the walls with purple paint that had been left over from when Ivy had painted her room. Only there wasn't quite enough, so part of

the wall had to remain green. They painted LOVE and PEACE in big bubble letters and wrote parts of the Desiderata on the wall. They painted big, groovy flowers all over the wall and gigantic peace symbols. They would sit and sing songs by Melanie, like I've Got a Brand New Pair of Roller Skates and The Cruel War is Raging. Ivy came over from her super groovy bedroom to join in and Joan and Ivy sang a love song that was about a girl being in love with a tough biker and we all thought that was so romantic.

Ivy's bedroom was purple and it had a slanted wall from where the roof of the house was. Ivy was a hippie, she had long, raven black hair and wore a blue calico maxi dress. She bought albums as soon as they came out at the store. She would walk down to Sam the Record Man and get the newest releases by the Rolling Stones, Joni Mitchell, Crosby Stills, Nash and Young, Led Zeppelin, and Dire Straights, when they appeared on the scene. Ivy would let us sit in her room and listen to the music. It was wonderful, a feast. I remember the sensation of slowly falling in love with an album as we listened to it several times in the first week after she had bought it. Or the wild shock of Bruce Springsteen, Born to Run, which was more like love at first sight. I could never stand the music kids listened to at school, and I remember doing a jump off the stage in grade seven, singing Can I Change My Mind? by Roy Buchanan and no one knew who he was. I was shocked. Secretly, though, it made me feel superior.

With Joan and Ellen in the laundry room, that left Linda, Candy and I to our own devices, such as they were. Our bedroom became very messy before any of us wanted to do something about it. We were completely addicted to making clothes for our cutouts. We would design new dresses and skirts and shoes, handbags and hats. We were always trying for new colour combinations, mine sometimes meeting with Linda's disapproval and then being trashed. We played a kind of Ken and Barbie dating scene even though they weren't Ken and Barbie, but

cut outs. Before Barbie went on her date with Ken, she would thoroughly clean her entire apartment, even though he was only going to come to the front door. After she was finished cleaning, she would jump in the shower. We had devised in our minds a special kind of shower that would remove every iota of dirt from her so that when she went on her date with Ken, she was immaculately clean.

Donna's Stories: The Black Sheep of the Family

The year I was turning eleven, I was supposed to be confirmed into the Zion Presbyterian Church. Since I had been going to Diana's church, I had heard verses from the bible about being immersed as an act of surrender, whereas at Zion they baptized babies and that was it. After a lot of thought and prayer, I decided I wanted to be immersed. So I told the minister at Zion and he recommended that if I was going to be baptized I should stay with that church. I really didn't want to leave Zion, it was my church, but I felt like I had to go. I felt like the minister was kicking me out really. I had painted a picture of Jesus on the cross during the time of my reflection and I gave it to him as a goodbye. I had no idea that this act of faith was going to turn me into the black sheep of the family.

Dad was mad at me for going to church. I went not just on Sunday mornings but on Sunday nights, too. That was when you could make requests for your favorite hymns. I always wanted to sing Be Still My Soul. On top of going twice on Sunday I also went to Young People's every week on Wednesday. So while my brothers and sisters were up to all sorts of different things, Dad never got mad at anyone else. He let everyone kind of go about their business. My

older brother was even selling pot and I am sure Dad knew about it because one day the cops came with their dogs to sniff around the backyard. They found a bag of weed in a bin Dad kept for burning stuff out by the garden. We were late for school that afternoon because we had to wait for the police dogs to get back in the van before we could go outside. Mom even said something about the police minding their own business. Yet I suffered the anger of my parents because I went to church.

Now, as I write this, it seems fitting that they would be mad at me. Especially Dad. The struggle between my father and I was one of ideas, and church was where I went to get fortified for the next battle.

Chapter Four: Pulling the Weave

Ghost Memory - Some Say the Heart is Just like a Wheel

I was in the middle of singing my favourite Linda Ronstadt song when Dad came home and walked into the kitchen. I knew he was there, but I didn't want to let on that I knew because then I would have to stop singing. And I just wanted to make it to the end of this dramatic song with no interruptions. Dad had been clearing his throat and when I didn't respond to that, he roughed his chair over the floor. I kept singing, I was nearing the end when he yelled, If you're singing for me you can quit anytime.

Aw Dad, what's the matter with me singing? Why shouldn't I just be able to sing if I am going to do all of these dishes that no one else is going to do?

Donna, I just need some peace and quiet.

So I stopped singing for that night. I was going to be there for a long time, there were tons of dishes left to do. At least an hour's worth. I could tell how upset Dad was by how he had yelled at me and the way he was so tense, holding the anger in his body.

Still, I felt like I had something for him and he needed it. I wanted to talk to him but I was scared by his reaction to my singing. If I asked him a question tonight that upset him, I knew he would be really mad. I saw the night stretch before me like a magician's unending scarf.

We had a big old kitchen table. It was gorgeous, really. There were fabulous carvings on the legs and all around the edges. It was usually covered with dishes and meals and crusted-on food. I was always amazed at how the grunge would be so deeply layered even though I knew it hadn't been long since I had last cleaned the table. It had leaves to make it bigger, so that when we needed to seat more people there would be enough room. Since these leaves were so seldom used, they were immaculate. I loved them too, just

in a less intimate way than the rest of the table. My method of cleaning in between the leaves was to scrape out most of it with a butter knife and then scrub the rest with a Kurly Kate. I would rub the wood clean with warm, sudsy water. My hands were always pruned. I absolutely loved that table and each time I cleaned it, I thought that I should be the one to inherit it. I knew the grain of the wood and the scars from use like the back of my hand.

Revised from Researcher's Notebook, November 1, 2010

I reread this last entry. I had considered cutting the reference to Linda Ronstadt and the song, "Heart like a Wheel". I wasn't sure if it was acceptable to include songs in this kind of writing but upon rereading, I was hit over the head with a powerful insight. The heart is like a wheel, when you bend it, you can't mend it. It is sad to believe that. But I think to some degree, it is true. Dad's heart, his hurt, his wounds were never healed. I always thought they could have been. Now, having walked with his pain for many years, I see that my heart has not been mended either. I am now admitting that I have been in process with this all of the time since Dad shared his experience with me.

Personal Journal Entry, Remembrance Day, 2010.

Today I realized that every day has been Remembrance Day for me since Dad first shared his memories and questions with me. We had a time to remember Dad at Mom's this afternoon. Carl's wife, Heather, had the idea. She has never met Dad; he had been dead for many years when she and Carl met. Yet, she says she has always felt a connection with him.

*She told me that any time she thinks about him, the next day someone says his name out of the blue. That happened recently as she was thinking over the possibility of having a time for him. Then, after supper one night at Mom's, the Tuesday before Remembrance Day, I was finishing in the kitchen and brought the tea into the dining room where Mom and Heather were sitting. Heather looked at me and said, Donna, you're A1. That stopped me in my tracks. The only time I had ever received those words directed at me was when Dad was lying on his death bed. I have written about this time in *Vocabulary of Silences*, but somehow I have left out this treasured comment from my father.*

I had been sitting with Dad all day, sometimes holding his hand, sometimes just sitting. Hours had gone by. Later in the afternoon, my younger brother Carl came in. Carl was very special to Dad. He always said he would be happy whether Mom had a boy or a girl, but I was the fifth in a row of girls. Carl was born four and a half years later, to much jubilation. So the atmosphere in the room brightened when Carl came in and I remember feeling just how much Dad loved Carl. Then Dad picked up a pencil and tore a piece off of a brown paper bag. He wrote on it and passed it to Carl. Then he told Carl to give it to me. It said Donna A1. I can still picture that scrap of paper with his handwriting on it. I had an old work jacket of Dad's that I wore everywhere. I put that scrap of paper in my breast pocket and kept it for years. Somehow that jacket got lost, in a move, probably. If I had it now it would be my most prized possession. Why have I neglected to write about that until now?

Personal Journal Entry, November 13, 2010: The Burden

We decided to have a gathering for Dad on Remembrance Day in the afternoon. We wanted to time it so that people who went to the service at the cenotaph would be able to do both. I had decided that finally I was clear about not wanting to go to the cenotaph. This came with acknowledging how present these memories have been all of my life.

We were having a potluck at one o'clock. I decided I wanted to walk to Mom's, it's just over a mile, down North River Road. I was taking a lentil shepherd's pie and I chose to carry it. As I set out I centered myself in the thought that I was consciously choosing to lovingly carry the burden. I walked on and even though it was only a mile, the burden became cumbersome. My arms were tired and sore. I never stopped though. I kept on walking and concentrating on feeling love through me as I put one foot in front of the other.

With most of the family assembled and several dishes being presented at various times, it was hard to have everyone in the room at the same time. People took turns sharing memories of Dad. My sister Candy spoke of the time she spent with Dad when she was little, helping him shovel or garden or just fix things. She said she just wanted to be with him, she just loved being with him. Now she wants him to be with her and to help her with life. My sister Joan talked about how everyone looked so miserable during the ceremony at the cenotaph and how it made her think of the miserable days Dad endured when he was overseas. She said we would never be able to understand what he went through and how that changed him. Carl talked about how he and Dad told each other that they loved each other all of the time, unlike some of us girls. Then he shared a story of Dad calling him to come home from the neighbour's. Dad usually went to the edge of our garden and called for Carl to come home from there. This time Carl delayed. The third time Dad called was the last. He took some quick, long strides and Carl tried to make it past Dad. The toe of Dad's boot met Carl's

backside and suddenly Carl was flying. He says he still remembers the sensation of his legs running while he was airborne. Heather shared how she came up with the idea of having this time in honour of Dad. Then I told them all the story of the A1 note. I told everyone how I came to see that for me, every day was Remembrance Day. I told them about carrying the casserole and how it was a symbol of how I have been carrying this burden for Dad since he first spoke with me about his experiences. I read Walt Whitman's poem, from Leaves of Grass, entitled Ashes of Soldiers. It seems as if it came from God himself, truly divine. The plea of love for these soldiers gives me another gift to offer up to my father. "I chant this chant of my silent soul in the name of all dead soldiers...Dearest comrades, all is over and long gone, but love is not over - and what love, O comrades!...Perfume therefore my chant, O love, immortal love, give me exhaustless, make me a fountain, that I exhale love from me wherever I go like moist perennial dew..." (p. 363).

Poem #5: The Truth: A Reprise

*The truth came out
of your mouth
and mine
but each word we spoke
fought against the other's
hearts straining
to be understood
to be heard*

*listening for a place
where our lines
could intersect*

Personal Journal Entry, (N.D.): A Blessed Time?

Where was the rest of the family when Dad and I had our talks? It was always the two of us, in my memory no one else even came into the room or walked through the kitchen to the bathroom. I am thinking that maybe this is because it was late on a school night. It could be that everyone else was in bed. It was often on Wednesday night after I came home from Young People's. I guess that makes sense except we didn't all go to bed that early and I was the second youngest in the family so there would be older brothers and sisters up much later, for sure. Maybe it really was a blessed time and everyone just stayed away without knowing the significance of what took place.

Personal Journal Entry, Thursday, December 18: What Did I Miss?

Tonight I had a long talk with my friend Julie. We talked about my thesis and my relationship with Dad. While we were talking, some new light was shed on the way I see myself. Somehow, it became clear that the reason I need a man to tell me who I am as a woman is because I didn't get that from Dad. During the years of puberty and early adolescence, I was busy with other things in my time with Dad. That was when we were having our gut wrenching talks. Dad was not in a place where he could give me what I needed.

Apparently, young girls are supposed to hear that they are beautiful from the inside out and that any man would be lucky to have them, that they are a rare treasure. I have always held what Dad and I talked about in the highest esteem. When it has been suggested to me that I was abused in some way because he put me in the role of a helper at too early an age, I know that is wrong. I know that it was right that Dad and I shared what we shared, that our hearts met over the kitchen table. As painful as it was, I am still grateful for it.

Now I am about to shave my head. I am doing this as a way of sharing my friend Mary Lynn's experience of cancer with her - I don't want her to feel alone. Aside from that, though, God is going to use this time as a way to show me who I am. I am going to be freed from the tyranny of getting my self-definition from other's eyes. This will be a time of redefining myself. So I look forward to a six month break from the world of men and romantic possibilities.

Donna's Stories: Going to the Moon

Our family was big enough that we didn't really need any friends, but we had them in the neighbourhood anyway. Summer afternoons could be passed quite nicely with Philip, Diana and I making mud cakes and playing house while we waited for them to bake in the sun. Or if we had waited long enough in between and it had some allure of novelty to it again, Philip and I could get married. They were lovely little ceremonies with daisies and solemnity. Diana would never marry him and I could never make her. She was my best friend, born four days earlier, and she would do a lot of things for me, and even share her Caramilk bar, but she would not marry

Philip Batt. So at a certain point I gave up and stopped asking her.

Gordie and some of the older neighborhood boys were always playing baseball, and they would let us play if they were desperate for other players or if someone's mother or father made them. Their new obsession was go-carts. We lived on a block with two steep streets on either side of it leading down to the river. They were so steep, the go carts picked up a scary velocity going downhill. The name of the game was to make the fastest go-carts, so they put their heads together to come up with the most aerodynamic design. We would go and watch them, and every once in a while, when the big boys were feeling generous, they would give us a ride in one of the lamer ones. Even that was enough to scare us out of our wits. But it didn't just scare us, it gave us an idea.

That summer there was a lot of talk about the moon landing. It hadn't happened yet, but we were all waiting for it with bated breath. We little kids were jealous. We wanted to go to the moon, too. So Philip, Diana and I devised a plan. As Gordie, Keith Craswell and the Joseph boys worked on their go-carts, we watched for tips. We were going to build a rocket and go to the moon. Soon my sister Candy found out about it and then it wasn't long before she told Linda. That was okay, we just had a bigger team now. We worked on it very seriously for a week or so. We had the perfect place to launch it from. Boyyer's maple tree. (We Wigmores never really thought it was Boyyer's tree so we called it that, quite tongue in cheek, to remember when Mr. Boyyer had measured our yard and his yard and then put up a fence, putting the maple tree inside his yard. That day Diana and I got into a fight which ended with Diana yelling at me to never step foot in her yard ever again as long as I lived. We had to walk to school at the same time, one mile there and one mile back every a day, so it didn't take long before it became too annoying to keep walking silently and separately. We made up.)

Finally, we felt our rocket was as ready as it could be for the space trip to the moon. We were more than ready. We clambered up the tree. The rocket was already firmly in place. We got into position and began the countdown. 10, 9, 8, 7... this was so exciting, I was lucky to be going to the moon. 6,5,4! Not every kid was going to get to go to the moon, you know! 3,2,1, BLAST OFF! I opened my eyes. I could not believe we had not taken off. What went wrong, I will never understand. We had everything worked out perfectly.

We consoled ourselves with a backyard fair. We had Throw the Clothes Pin in the Bottle, and Spin the Bottle, and we had races where you could win a prize. In our backyard, there was a little shed that we used for a playhouse and it was set apart for the end of the fair when we would all celebrate together with a tea party. Everything was going great. We were all running around laughing our heads off when suddenly we heard screaming. Candy was screaming and really freaking out, almost throwing up. Linda had stood on a board and it flew up and hit her in the head. It had a nail in it too, so the worst of it was that the nail went right into her head. She had to get STITCHES! That was pretty bad. So that was the end of the fair for that day.

Donna's Stories: No More Good Night Kisses

Just before I turned six, we moved. We moved to the house right next door. I guess one more person was one too many for that pink house. It was sandy pink, not bubblegum pink, but I will never understand how someone in their right mind could have picked that colour for a house. Funny thing was, it matched our cat, Pinky, perfectly. He was quite the cat, always taking off for days at a time and coming back with another piece of him missing, usually a piece of ear.

Pinky was cranky and did NOT like to be petted. But whenever I was sad, Pinky would be there. He would come and sit beside me if I was crying. I was the only one in the family who liked Pinky. His crankiness was just a part of who he was.

I remember when we moved into the big house. It was white and trimmed with black. The house made me think of one of our colourings because Linda always told us how much better they looked trimmed in black. I remember walking back and forth carrying things over. Dad had even let us try to paint the walls, but I didn't do well and was given a different job. Somehow somebody got the brilliant idea that we should put talcum powder on the floor. The rooms were empty and the floors were clear of any garbage. It was so wonderful to walk into this new empty space all clean and sparkling. Until the talcum powder. We poured it on and took a run and slid for several feet. We slid and slid until the air was white.

After the Craswells moved into the pink house, we realized we had left the pool table in the basement. When Dad went over to get it, Mr. Craswell refused to give it to him and said that it was legally his. We were so cheesed off at the Craswells, it didn't help us get off on friendly terms with the kids. Just like Mr. Bovyer and the maple tree.

Soon after we had settled into the new house, Linda and Candy made the decision that they were too old to be kissing Mom and Dad goodnight. Because I was a part of the trio, The Three Little Pigs, I figured if they stopped, I had to stop too. I didn't feel ready. I remember looking at Mom and Dad as they stood there in the hall while we all went up to them. Linda went first, saying goodnight so nonchalantly, it was like she didn't even want a kiss! Something has to stop this, they have to change their minds! Candy said goodnight and started walking up the stairs after Linda. Mom and Dad have to stop us, they just have to! But nothing happened, no one intervened and I walked up to them and said goodnight and headed up the stairs. I climbed

the stairs slowly, trying to give them lots of time to call me back, but they never did.

Donna's Stories: Sleepovers and Other Nighttime Events

While Diana never wanted to stay over at my house, I was always welcome to stay at her house and I enjoyed it immensely. Her house was not only clean, it was practically empty. There were no piles of books or used dishes lying around. Their couch was covered in a protective plastic coating. Mrs. Bovyer would always make us popcorn, and although she used oil instead of butter, it was still a treat. Sometimes late at night we would have cheese and crackers. And not just a few. We would slice the thinnest slices possible from the block of cheddar barrel, because that was how we liked it. We would cut ourselves off as soon as we could, but we always managed to make a considerable dent in the block of cheese. Bovyers were incredibly thrifty, so when I think about this indulgence now, it makes me wonder how we got away with it. Sometimes Diana and I would spend our own money on a Caramilk bar. We would get one of the big ones and split it in half. Our favourite place to enjoy this was underneath the maple tree.

One night, when I was staying overnight at Bovyer's and we were already in our nighties and ready for bed, Diana and I decided that we wanted to go outside. It was a beautiful night, but there was no way we would be able to get past Mr. Bovyer as he sat reading the newspaper on the couch. We were waiting for him to go downstairs where he would not only be out of sight, but the classical music that he loved to listen to would be turned up so loud that he would never hear us even if we stomped out of the house. He really was in another world when he was down there, nothing could get his attention.

So we decided to climb out of the window. They had the kind where one pane of glass

slides over the other. We slid it open, pulled a chair very quietly up to the window, and climbed out. We hadn't really thought about the jump we would have to make. Neither of us was very athletic, but we made it anyway. We stumbled to the ground and took off running. It was so wild to be outside in our nighties. We twirled and watched the nighties fill up with air. We twirled and twirled until we fell down, dizzy. We ran up and down the little hill that led to the maple tree. I looked down at the grass and my bare feet on it as I ran along. I can still picture the green grass with the darkening night falling on it. We had just had a break underneath the tree when we heard Mr. Bovyer calling Diana! Come in this instant! Now high tail it young lady!

One hot summer night, everyone in the neighbourhood was running past our house. People were yelling about a fire in the field beyond where we swam. We took off to join the crowd. A meteorite had landed in the field and burnt a huge hole in the ground. That was so cool, to think that it had come from outerspace. We looked up at the sky as we sat beside the burnt ground. Someone came and took the rock away, I guess it's in a museum somewhere, but it was our rock.

Revised from Researcher's Notebook, Friday, December 18, 2009: Who I Am

Carl Leggo has written a lot about identity and autobiography - I will look into that tomorrow. The way things seem to be falling into place make it as though the days of being blocked from writing were supposed to happen. Or at least as though it is not too late. But no, with the hair shaving thing and the side issues that are springing out of that being so important and not peripheral at all, it makes me wonder. I wanted to write about the love of

my father and the love of God, my Father. But, it seemed that it wasn't a part of our story so much. Once I started writing, the idea of God's love was peripheral to the central story of Dad and me. So I wondered how I would get love into the mix and was trying to graciously accept the fact that it might not work out in this effort.

Now, all of a sudden, I am being presented with this question of identity and where I get my identity from. I am delving into this area because I realize I need to be grounded in who I am, I need to stop only seeing who I am as a reflection in someone else's eyes. More and more, with the belief that I have a Heavenly Father who is love and who forgives, I want to see myself the way God sees me.

Researcher's Notebook, Saturday, December 19, 2009: Different Selves.

I remember quite clearly when I was in junior high being aware that it was up to me to choose who I wanted to be. There were several aspects to this realization. For one, I was presented with this information in some way during a class in health. I had six older sisters and I remember thinking over all of their qualities and picking out one quality that stood out for each of them and checking that off my list of possibilities. Funny how in the end I chose to be the spiritual one, the one focused on morals. My friend Elizabeth tells me that the youngest child often has that identity because it is all there is left when their turn comes. It really feels like me, though. This was also the time of my conversations with my father. I had been philosophizing since I could remember and somehow the talks with Dad just fit in well with my identity. But this was just one part of my identity. This was one role I played in my life

story. As Leggo (2001) writes, "When I name myself or when I am named by others, I am created (constructed or written) with identities, and these identities are multiple because I always occupy many subject positions" (p. 8). Schwandt (2007) refers to these subject positions and further explains the flexible concept of identity:

Some postmodernists argue that individuals are 'sites' for competing cultural interpretations of the subject or self and thus are very skeptical of notions such as an identity, a subject, or a self. On this view, identity (or the self) is always fragmented, never fixed, always being remade (p. 144).

In writing about emotional development and veterans, there was evidence put forward that the young man Dad was when he went to war had been on a mission at home which was interrupted by the war. He was in the middle of constructing his own identity and did not get far in that task before he became a young man who had to kill or be killed. What would that do to a person's notion of self? How would it interrupt whatever it was he had been figuring out about himself and life? What new reading of who he was would he be left with? And how would he ever reconcile that self with the one who returned home to be a husband and a father? As for me, what did it do to my notion of self to be the one who took in all of Dad's stories?

I am now coming to respect our conversations more, respect the connection Dad and I had. It has become clear to me that I was different with my father during those conversations and maybe he was different with me too. We acted in ways which, while being true to ourselves, put us in positions we had never been in before. We behaved and spoke and questioned and listened in ways that we never would again. Yet I look at these conversations from the many positions or roles which I have taken on: as a daughter, as a believer, as a mother with a child now the same age as I was back then, trying to figure out what those talks

did to me, as a teacher looking for the lesson wondering if I can absorb it and teach it, as a listener, as a fellow sojourner through the valley of death, as someone who has spent meaningful passages of my life questioning God and questing for God.

I am glad for this awareness, this conscientization of who I am being. As Ursula Kelly (1997) writes, "Unsettled notions of what constitutes the personal, self, memory, history, and truth do, however, create the grounds for a more critical and reflective auto/biographical practice" (cited in Leggo, p.66).

Letter #2 to Donald M. Murray

Dear Donald Murray:

Perhaps you don't want to talk about this so much or even think about it. So if you don't want to answer I understand. But what happened to your self image when you went to war? How do you think what you did and what you endured affected your identity? You say you have never thought that you could talk to your own daughters about your experiences in combat. I beg to disagree with you there, Donald. I know, no matter what others say, that there is no way that my father and I could have been close without him sharing his stories with me. But I ask you to share with me, in letters, and I will listen with a daughter's heart. There is so much in common between your experience and that of my father. Yet he was entirely silent on some of the themes which you have written about. You began to address this by saying that you were sickened and surprised by how easily you could pull the trigger and kill. Will you tell me more about how you ever processed those feelings?

Yours truly,

Donna Wigmore

daughter of a veteran

Letter #1 from Donald M. Murray

Dear Donna,

I think I will be able to tell you more about what it was like to be in combat. I never met your father but there are some things I would hazard to guess. The only men who I served with who had no fear didn't make it. There was so much to be fearful of. So much cause for caution and heightened alertness. Donna, I am sure your father felt fear. We went in fear and in the name of all that was holy. We were afraid of what would happen if we didn't go. We listened to stories of the German 'monsters' and what they were doing and what they would do if we didn't stop them.

It will be up to you to decide if you think your father and I shared similar experiences. I know I felt comradeship with the people in my regiment. Yet I became increasingly aware of how I was a comrade in arms with the enemy, too.

It is good for us to be corresponding. I never could talk to my own daughters about the war. How could they understand something that was so alien to day to day life? And your father left so much unsaid. I hope, for you, some of the empty spaces are being filled in.

Yours truly,

Donald M. Murray

Personal Diary Entry, October 3, 2010: One Time

Dad told me about the time when he first arrived overseas. He landed in London where his brother Lloyd had been for several years. So Dad looked his brother up as soon as he could. In the time Lloyd had been away, Dad had grown from a tall boy to a very tall man. He was nineteen years old, 6 foot 4, with jet black hair and bright blue eyes. He tracked Lloyd down in a pub in London. He saw Lloyd from across the room and started over to say hello. It seemed to him that Lloyd saw him but didn't react. So Dad slowed down. He walked up to Lloyd very slowly. Lloyd's gaze fell on Dad every once in a while, but there was still no sign of recognition. And then Dad was there, right in front of Lloyd and Lloyd just looked at him and said, Yes?

Dad said, Don't tell me you don't even recognize your kid brother!

Ghost Memory - The Conversation Continues

It's been weeks since Dad and I talked. But tonight we are in the kitchen, I am at the dishes, he is in his chair at the head of the table. His legs are elegantly crossed as he rolls a cigarette in mid air.

Dad, when you said they taught lies in church, what were you talking about?

I was hoping he was ready to talk. He was drunk, drunker than I had ever seen him except for the time Ellen and I had to help him keep from falling down. I remember him standing in the hallway, just outside the kitchen door, and his legs seemed to be giving out from underneath him. Ellen and I came to help him and as we leaned into him to support him he looked at us. His eyes were filled with tears and he said, You hate me don't you?

Ellen and I looked at each other. I didn't know what to say. Then Ellen said, No Dad. We don't hate you, we hate what you're doing.

I remember being stunned by her words. She was only three years older than me. How could she have known what to say? That taught me something. It clarified my feelings for Dad in a way. Then Ellen and I started to help Dad up the stairs, each of the thirteen steps a struggle, some worse than others as his legs buckled under. Then we walked him all the way down the long hallway to his bedroom.

Tonight he isn't quite that drunk, but I have a handle on how he is by the time he sits down at the table. He had been outside with his friend Art for a long time. When they finally came in, they talked more and then Art went home. Dad came in and sat down and I saw this as my chance. Where he sat, the pot cupboard was right behind him. It ran the length of the steps. All of the pots and pans that we usually used were dirty so it was empty. The door to the pot cupboard hung open. Like a big gaping mouth waiting to be filled. Or open in a silent scream.

I wanted to give Dad what I had. I wanted to give him God. I thought if I could talk him into coming to church, he might be able to be happy.

So I ask,

What lies did they teach you in church, Dad?

And this is what he tells me.

I had a happy childhood, with a big family and a great life on the farm. Before I went overseas, life was good. I worked very hard for my parents, but that was a source of pride. Uncle Joe and I used to pal around, we'd travel through the countryside singing at the top of our lungs. Joe played the guitar while I guided the horses. We played hockey together and I was known for my ability and strength. The peaceful pleasure of it all came to an end when the war started. My brothers and sisters and I would talk about the war as

we walked to school or wherever. We would discuss the latest atrocities and news of concentration camps with growing fear and hatred for the Germans. We were told a lot that was true and a lot that wasn't.

Dad, what lies did they tell you?

After I repeated my question I stood there waiting in front of him, on my way to the pot cupboard returning the pot Mom had made stew and dumplings in the night before. He looked at me for a while. He looked, all of a sudden, like he was badly hurt, as though he had just received a blow. Then he kind of gasped and said, "They told us the Germans were monsters."

I had been away from our company for several days. I was hiding out in a barn. For more than three days, all I had to eat was raw potatoes I found in the barn. I was in hiding, I couldn't risk being seen. I hadn't eaten or bathed in days and I had a pretty good start on a beard. I knew there wasn't much left in me to go on so I knew I had to risk being seen. I had to make it back to my company. So I set out from there and walked and walked. I was walking through a field and from a long way off I could see a German approaching. I could tell by the colour of his uniform. From a long way off we readied ourselves. One of us was not supposed to make it out of this encounter. As we got nearer and nearer I could see the blond of his hair and the blue of his eyes. My hand was on my gun as I realized that this man, this monster, didn't have a beard. He was a boy, Donna. He was just a kid and I was supposed to kill him. The German and I looked at each other and walked on.

Dad was staring into my eyes, it was like he was searching me for an answer. And I was looking into his eyes, trying to take away some of the pain that I saw there. Trying not to flinch, or in some way be unworthy of his trust and confidence.

Letter #2 from Donald M. Murray

Dear Donna,

In my last letter I mentioned the fear that moved us to sign up for duty. One of the greatest horrors of war was that in battle, we became the very thing we were most afraid of. We became the monsters. I was capable of any horror I had heard the Germans had committed. That may be the worst legacy the war left with me.

In combat, shutting down emotions is a way of life. After the bombs, the firefights, the mines, we have a lifetime of silence. Those who were in the front lines rarely speak of their time in combat. When I talk of war, it seems exciting, dramatic, bizarre, but the sad truth is that most of combat became ordinary. It was a job. It had taken hours, perhaps minutes, under fire to become a stranger to myself. Normal feelings turned off in combat remained off. I had an ordinary war - I will examine what becomes ordinary in combat by writing about it as long as I live.

We walked over dead bodies as if they were fallen logs. We were animal soldiers doing what had to be done to protect our fellow countrymen.

Now I stand against war. As a child we stood to support war. I feel lucky, proud and ashamed. I am saddened that we are not kind and use religion or ethnicity to justify war. I want people to understand why veterans may suddenly lash out when they are wakened by a touch, withdraw when others point out the beauty of moonlight on snowy woods, seem tense when they walk in the woods and hate to march in Armistice Day parades.

Yours truly,

Donald M. Murray

(From Now and Then, August 16, 1998, August 1, 2006, September 12, 2006, September 26, 2006)

Poem #6: *Buckling Under the Weight*

This man

his legs buckled

under the weight

graceful man

sparse in his gestures

just so in the way he moved his long hands

he was known to be able to snap a broom handle in two with his bare hands

that, after jumping over it back and forth as he held it

This man, his legs buckled under

the weight

Once when he was drunk and had so much he needed his children's help to get to bed

Once, much later but not late enough

He was walking through the kitchen after supper and his legs gave way underneath him.

I never saw him stumble except for these two times.

The cancer was back, it had traveled to his brain, not having been satisfied with the one

lung it had taken five years earlier

This man

his legs buckled

under the weight

of what was too much to carry

Poem #7: Body and Soul

What came back?

My father was nineteen years old when he went to war

for God and country

for love?

He loved, had friends,

drank and played hockey with them

was nothing to walk more than ten miles through the fields for a gathering

the journey was part of the event

Dad had already tried to enlist before,

they said he had flat feet,

was too young anyway,

took him when he was

nineteen, so was his friend

his friend

who was blown to bits the first day he saw battle

right in front of my father

What came back? His friend made no return.

Dad was not injured

Dad came home. But no:

Something part of him never returned.

What part did he sacrifice when he endured that sight?

He survived the war.

No, he did not survive the war.
He was there when his friend was blown up,
when he exploded from the impact
when his arms and legs went
hurtling through the air
How could he survive that?
What part of him survived that?
What part of him came back
and what was blown to pieces that day?
Watch as the spirit of Willard Wigmore is hit
watch as he reels from the blow
watch as he takes this in
his friend did not come home
don't be surprised that he is gone now too

Revised from Researcher's Notebook, December 24, 2009: "They lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow..."

In November, I spoke with my grade three students about the war and my father. When we read *In Flander's Fields*, I explained to them the story surrounding the poem. They listened, captivated, as I told them the story of John McRae's work with the wounded. I told them about him tending to a friend who had been injured. When his friend died, John McRae was deeply affected. He sat down to write the poem. Now, my students had been reading this poem or hearing it since grade one. I knew that we could not just read it and leave it at that.

We had to look at what McRae was telling us to do. There is a real exhortation in this poem and I feel strongly that there is a real exhortation, if not in words at least in spirit, in what my father shared with me.

McRae tells us not to break faith, he gives us the task of carrying on the battle with the enemy. His validation for the continued fight is the love that we have for the fallen. "They lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, loved and were loved" (lines 7-9). This is an emotionally charged poem and when we read it there is an unspoken reaction each time. I see many of my fellow teachers and parents at school assemblies taking these words in and many have a look of accepting the charge McRae lays on us. Yet there are others, like myself, who feel the spirit of the poem, care deeply for the fallen, grieve them, but do not have the same reaction.

My father would never ask another person to do what he had done. He would never ask another person to have to suffer through what he suffered, witness what he witnessed. Never. The war broke his heart, broke his spirit, left him lame.

I know there was little acknowledgement of emotional trauma that war inflicted on soldiers back then. This was before the coining of the term, post traumatic stress disorder. Back then they called it shell shock. I don't think that begins to cover the complexity and depth of the wound suffered by my father and others like him. They returned physically whole, not a scratch on them. No visible wounds. Yet they carried with them all that they saw, all that they did. How is it possible to reconcile the young man that was before battle with the man that did those things? For many, the experiences left them conflicted in spirit. They were given no help in processing the trauma war inflicted on them. Yet they were expected to return to a normal life. By that I mean they were meant to carry on as if nothing had ever happened. My father came home and married. He had eight children of his own and he was a stepfather to

two more. I do not think he ever truly recovered from the war.

Researcher's Notebook (N.D.): The Battle

I understand William James when he talks about the battle in life. In this battle, our struggle affects things beyond us which we may not see but we may perceive.

If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight (cited in Dillard, 1989, p. 86).

I have always looked at my talks with Dad as a failure. I could never argue my point strongly enough to convince him. I wanted him to believe in God, to receive His love and be able to love. I think he did believe in God and he was very angry with Him and felt that God had betrayed him. Yet it hadn't been God, but people speaking for God that had convinced Dad to sign up for duty. In the end, his quarrel remained with God for letting war happen and I had to admit that and concede that I didn't have an answer for him. How could a loving God allow war to happen?

When I would think about this, which I did for most of my teenage years, I realized that this was where many people were stuck in their relationship with God or their position in their faith. I wanted to understand the answer. I studied Job extensively and wrote a long paper on it. That left me with the understanding that there is a loving God, but because we need to have free will to be able to truly love, that opens us up to the possibility of hatred and evil. And that is where war was born. So I believed this and carried with me the sorrow that it

left behind. Somehow I have peace because I believe that in the end, God will make it all right. But Dad didn't have that peace. And I failed in trying to give it to him.

I have considered the importance of my writing about Dad in a certain way that seemed hard to convey. I thought the purpose would be difficult for others to understand. Now I don't want to shy away from trying. What is so meaningful to me in Dad's story is the eternal struggle between good and evil. He felt he had to go to war to stop Hitler, yet the young men he was told to kill were just the same as he was and not monsters like he had been taught. My perspective on this was very clear to me when I was young and experiencing all of this with my father for the first time. (Even though I know that I have tried to be honest, I have caught myself altering things a bit, attempting to make myself look more enlightened.) My view of how this was a part of the battle between good and evil has changed over time, and the way I have interpreted my role and my father's role has changed several times. I will persist and call this time, this space, this conflict, a battle in the war between good and evil.

When the conversations first took place, I thought I was God's champion delving deep to try and save my father. When I began to write about this the first time I caught myself saying that I was mostly concerned about Dad's peace of mind and that he be happy. Something didn't sit right when I read that. I realized that the truth is different from that. I know that as a child I listened to what was spoken in church and I was concerned for my father's soul. I was definitely more concerned about his soul than his peace of mind. I wanted him to be happy, certainly, but it was a secondary concern. Another time when I went through the years of these incidents I wanted to understand my father and what made him drink. I wanted to forgive him for drinking and being distant, and so I visited the past to find peace for my heart. But when I got there, when I arrived at that emotional landscape, I saw nothing

needed my forgiveness. Instead, there was only a deep compassion for the pain my father carried in his heart. Now I have gone back again. This time I see that I have succeeded. My success was that I was there to hear my father. That he did not carry that entirely alone. And that he knew I heard him, waited with him while he went back over the moments of intense pain and moral confusion.

When I talked this over with Deirdre Kessler, she turned my thoughts to what was accomplished. I did listen to Dad. Not only was I there when he spoke his story, I was fully present. I teach my students to listen with their hearts at circle time, to slow down in order to listen attentively. I certainly listened with my heart to what my father shared with me. I really took it in. He knew I loved him and earnestly wanted to help him. Maybe I didn't help him exactly the way I had hoped, but I loved him while he was unburdening his soul. The grief that poured out of his mouth and heart did not fall on deaf ears. He was heard. And in that hearing, maybe his burden was lessened. Maybe I helped shoulder my father's load. Oh God, Dad. Twenty five years since you've died, I still love you. You will always be in my heart. I still carry your burden.

*Personal Journal Entry, Saturday, February 13, 2010: "If You Forget My Love,
I'll try to Remind You."*

I am listening to Patti Griffin (2004), "When It Don't Come Easy." If you break down, I'll drive out and find you. If you forget my love, I'll try to remind you. Suddenly this brings to mind the time my bike broke down on the way to Kensington from Charlottetown. Of course, I

called Dad. This kind of thing was where you could count on Dad. Or if you were leaving the Island or coming home from away you would always get a hug. You could count on it and it was one of the highlights of traveling. A rare expression of his love and his fathering surrounded by so much silence.

‘Tonight I cry for the love that I lost and the love I never found.’ I remember that I set out to find the love of my father and the love of my Heavenly Father. When I spoke with Deirdre, she challenged me by asking don’t I mean that I want to find my father. Well, yes and no. I always knew that while he was absently with us he was as present as he could be. Certainly I understood that after our conversations. I had always wanted to understand him, and I did come to understand him in a way that I couldn’t have without those times of sharing. I think back to Sullivan’s insight that life writing is a process of remembering. She refers to the Spanish verb for remember, recordar, which literally translates ‘pass back through the heart’ (Sullivan, 1995, p. xiv). Now this last ‘passing through my heart’ has awoken my love for him, reminding me of how he loved me the best he could. Dear God, I can love him better now that you’ve shown me more. I only wish I could have loved him better, sweeter, truer, closer to his heart to bring him joy.

Researcher’s Notebook, Thursday, November 25, 2010: From Sisyphus to Métis.

I just got home from Sean’s book launch. It was inspirational. His poems were so fluid, so spontaneous. I enjoyed his way with words and ideas. After he read, Melissa and Joanne and I were standing around talking about the process of thesis writing. I had said earlier that I

felt like I was Sisyphus. The emotional weight of this work pressing on me was like the stone that Sisyphus was doomed to roll back up the hill for eternity. I realized that I had been rolling the weight of this off me for brief interludes through my life. This would happen when I talked to someone about Dad's conversations with me. But the stone always rolled back down on me. This time the stone rolled back down on me and I knew I actually could muster the strength to push it back up the hill at least one more time. I came to the awareness that it would not be the best thing for me to do. There would be too great a cost.

So now I felt like I was at the bottom of the hill with a very large stone on my chest. It was becoming more and more obvious that I had to get the stone off of me because it was crushing me. I was not sure what this would mean, only that it would entail further research into my past. I could plow through and wrap things up quickly, or I could deal with what was literally pressing on me in the moment. I believe the burden was not a curse, rather, it was the precipitator for all of the transformation to occur. It was the weight that pulled me in to this exploration.

As Melissa, Joanne and I picked up the thread of our earlier conversation, I said I was really tired of being Sisyphus. Melissa suggested I could be Nike. Wasn't Nike the winged goddess? I didn't like that idea so much so she said how about Zeus. Zeus was such a bastard. No way. Right then the idea occurred to me that I should be Métis. She is already in my work. Métis was the first wife of Zeus. She was a shape shifter and that is why the creators of literary métissage decided to use her name in the naming of this form of writing. I explained to Melissa and Joanne the transformative power of life writing - how as you write you are changed by the process of writing and reflecting and writing again. Melissa was inspired by the idea. She shifted the focus to transformation from where it had been because she was so

enthused by this idea of transformation as the path, the process, and not as a sudden thing. She was suddenly illuminated by this. It was as if she was giving off light. Her eyes filled with tears and she smiled and said that is why you are finding this so hard, Donna. It is because you are going through a process of change and change is exhausting. I hugged her and thanked her for her light and insight. Her clarity of understanding is just what I needed to shift over. Tomorrow will be a new day, a day of hope.

Another Threshold

Before I begin the exegesis, I must go back to where I began. In the beginning, I set out to bring glory to God and honour to Dad. I want to look through my writing and see if I have accomplished these two goals. I think I have brought honour to Dad, if only in my own eyes. This gave me a chance to love him again, to love him more as I revisited those moments where he was in so much pain as he tried to honestly speak of God in the same breath as the horror of war. Yes, Dad has been loved and I have honoured him in my heart. It will remain for the reader to determine if there is honour for other veterans in what I have written.

When I consider whether I have brought glory to God, I think of all of the changes that have been brought about by the writing. Remembering that it was God who started me on this journey of writing and then in particular writing about the love of my father and the love of my heavenly Father, I look upon every good thing that has come out of the writing process as a tribute to God's beautiful compassion.

Chapter Five: Exegesis: Literary Métissage is Transformative

This exegesis is written in two parts. The first section records how life writing is transformative and is divided into seven sections. The second part of the exegesis deals with form and representation in life writing.

Life Writing and Literary Métissage is Therapeutic, Not Therapy

In *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, Louise De Salvo (1999) explains what is needed in order for life writing to be therapeutic. She warns against simply writing about trauma or serious memories without taking the time to write about how one feels about the events being described. It is important that the writer explore what happened in the past while at the same time exploring her feelings about what happened. In order to heal through the process of writing, it is important that the writer does not use a detached manner, rather, she must approach the past with a holistic self: the intellect and the emotions working together (p. 25). This integrated approach offered me the opportunity to consider and re-evaluate how I felt about what happened and how I feel about it now.

Because of the flexibility of self that was borne out of communion with other writers as I read professional literature, and borne also out of my own spiritual journey, I was able to see things differently. I was able to experience the stories of me and my father in a new way, and I was able to feel differently about them. I was able to feel more hope and love. Literary métissage offers a wonderful, healing methodology for sharing painful stories. Life writing is transformative and the practice of literary métissage offers new possibilities for transformation as

it arranges for the juxtaposition of people's stories. There is the hope that we will be transformed, our hearts will be enlarged, our views of the world and the other will be enlightened and our view of our self will be altered as we write and as we hear other's stories resonating with our own. For myself I have layered several different types of writing so this juxtaposition will bring me deeper into the truths of my experiences with my father. This juxtaposition led me to be able to see more love in those talks with Dad. This reverberation rings a bell of hope.

Dying to Self

In reading Carl Leggo's (1998) writing on deconstructionalism, I was drawn to how deconstruction anticipates the concerns of literary métissage, and I am amused to realize that I have been examining and taking myself apart since I started this work, in two ways that had a wonderful synchronicity. I have tried to be honest about my biases and that called for a certain scrutiny which I was not accustomed to direct at myself. There is a parallel path to this which I have been walking. I said to God that I wanted to put everything on the table, that after many years of singing songs about surrender and feeling that I was holding back but not able to do anything about it, I came clean. I said that I finally did want to totally surrender. The good, the bad, what I knew about myself and what was there that I wasn't aware of. Even things that I was pretty sure were God's will for me, like teaching, were to be reconsidered. That started a process of change. I wanted to offer everything to God, and see what came back. Miller (2000) refers to this state as a necessary condition of selflessness, not to be confused with a denial of self, but rather seeing yourself as part of a larger whole and connected to that whole:

In the West we tend to look at the self as something hard and fixed. This rigidity can also make change very difficult as we begin to over identify with our sense of self and this over identification can lead to inflexibility. However, if we can soften the edges around the sense of self we can learn to identify with others and see their point of view. Change can become much more organic if we see ourselves within a larger context of being (p. 149).

This process was occurring at precisely the same time as the bulk of the writing for this work. What I found were discoveries about myself as I lived and wrote. These discoveries were changing me so when the next change occurred, it was happening to a different person than the last one had happened to. Thinking back to Sullivan's (1995) notion of our memories passing through the heart (p.xiv), each time I wrote, I was changed as the events and emotions passed back through me again.

In Donald M. Murray's *Shoptalk* (1990), he quotes V.S. Naipal "To write was to learn. Beginning a book, I always felt I was in possession all of the facts about myself; at the end I was always surprised" (p. 8). This is what the experience has been like, the surprises have continued to the end of the writing process.

Remembering and Reflecting in Life Writing Allow for Transformation

I write to explore the area of the past where Dad and I intersected each other's lives in such a profound way. It is as if the pain itself calls me back. In *Researcher's Notebook: From Sisyphus to Métis*, I discuss how I began this work with a weight on me. The pain indicated that I may have lost something there, in that space and time I shared with my father, and I wanted to go back to see if I could find it or at least find out what it was or is.

I am not alone in this experience of being called back by the pain. Again and again I read the work of other writers who revisit childhood memories that are filled with heartache. The autoethnographic dissertations of two writers come to mind. John Guiney-Yallop's (2008) heart expanding poetic inquiry and Allison Catherine Pryer's (2008) sensually evocative work both explore the sexual abuse the writers suffered as children. In De Salvo's (1999) *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, she refers to a multitude of life writers who deal with trauma and pain.

Yet we are not drawn back to these difficult times merely to open a closed wound and leave it gaping. Something happens as we write and reflect on what occurred and how we felt about it. Yes, it does bring the pain into the present, but only for a time. Throughout the process of reliving the memories and writing about them and reflecting on emotions experienced both in the past and the present, healing and growth occur. I recommend De Salvo's (1999) work as a guide for this process.

In my faith I have always felt a distance between myself and God. I know that distance is not supposed to be there. My understanding is that God loves me; I should feel that love. Instead, I know it. I accept it as a concept, but my heart remains cold sometimes, not receiving this love which I believe in and hold to be the true centre of existence. In my faith, God is seen as a father, so it makes sense that issues that I have with God may be connected to issues that I have had with Dad. This was one driving reason to go through these memories and see what I can find. What happened as I lived and wrote and reflected was that the healing and transformation came together. The fluidity of self was a gift from Métis, the shapeshifter, and it allowed room for these changes. Because I became more flexible in my identities I was able to be more open to others, to be more affected by connecting with others. In all of this, I hear a sweet song of love

being sung to me.

Remembering and Recreating the Self

Throughout my journal, I refer to how this writing has affected me. This process has been full of surprising revelations and has led me to places I did not mark on my map as destinations when I set out. I have learned more about life, and that has had an impact on me in the present. Most importantly, I think, are the things that I have learned about myself in the process of exploring these old stories. I have carried them around for all this time, yet in the experience of writing day to day, the stories interacted with who I am now, with my world now, and the dynamic produced epiphanies.

There are two important ways that this writing has acted upon me. Not irrevocably, all of these changes require vigilance to maintain, yet they have underscored growth that had begun many years ago. One is related to ways my identity began to open, and the other is related to ways I awakened poetically. Both call for a certain bravery and focus. I must remember my new choices, my new self-definitions, and remember to forget the old.

In Rosa Chen's (2006) paper, *A Journey of Writing the Self*, she clearly demonstrates how life writing provides opportunities for transformation through both narrative writing and poetic inquiry. "In the process of writing the selves, narrators pose critical questions about themselves and others by revealing inner conflicts...In writing the selves, narrators are always reflecting about themselves in relation to others, questing, and responding to themselves and the outer world" (p. 1). It is in this process of responding to the outside world that the fruit of the

reflecting comes to be. In the journal entries, I mention that I had in prayer and contemplation surrendered my identity to God. I wanted to be open to where God wanted to lead me and learn if there were changes that would help me be more the person I was created to be. I felt I was living in fear and that was stopping me from expressing myself. An example of that would be my great trepidation as I began to write. In the meantime, I went through what could be described as a desert time, where I was not entirely sure who I was. My identity was in flux. This is in keeping with the representational form of literary métissage. As Dwayne Donald (2007) writes of his experience with the craft: “I wanted to identify myself with something because I felt I had been lost to time and the elements,...but Identity is more resilient than that. It continues to recreate itself in ways that cannot be predicted” (Belly Buttes, para. 4).

Carl Leggo (2005) writes about the transformative power of writing poetically. He claims that:

...transformative learning can be effectively promoted by giving attention to poetry and poetic knowing and poetic living. I am learning to live poetically, and I am learning that the heart of pedagogy is revitalized and sustained by poetic knowing, being and becoming. Poetry engages us with language, nurtures the inner life, acknowledges the particular and the local, encourages us to listen to our hearts, fosters flexibility and trust, and invites creativity and creative being (p. 1).

I know that the poetic way of knowing, being and becoming is new to me, yet it is something I have been drawn to all of my life. I have always valued emotion and the inner life. Now I trust that by engaging with a poetic epistemology and ontology I will continue on the path which has begun with this work. I believe that I will come to marry the inner and the outer life more and more. In the words of Paulo Freire, I want to become one of “those who work to shorten the distance between what they say and what they do” (2007, p. 83). Based on the experience of this writing journey, I think continuing in my life writing will help with that.

Literary Métissage and the Problem of Reified Stories

Considering my stories before I began to write, I was downhearted. I felt that there was flatness to them. They had been told so many times before. Having told the stories to myself and others through the years, the paths of memory became worn, grooves settled in. In order to escape those grooves I needed to find a new way to see them and write about them. I suddenly needed to get beyond what I knew as the facts to have the opportunity to see more.

If we think about the prefix *re* in researcher, we understand that our questing and questioning are always a returning, a turning again. This is a ruminative process. In my experience, the research process is an experience of lingering with memory and emotion and heart and story, a process of leaning on language in order to seek understanding and wisdom, a process of attending sensually and sensitively to life. The research process is a verb, a journey, a flow. Like life, like living (Leggo, 2007, p.194).

So I had to go back and research my selves, my father, and the space between us. What happened and how did it come to pass? How did it seem to me at the time? Can I pick up some more truth with this visit? I need to know something and I do not know what that is. Will I know it when I see it? Will I return with more than what I had when I ventured forth, or have I risked something precious in this return to such a dangerous arena?

This is a situation all life writers must face and it is answered well by the freedom of literary métissage. Often our important stories “acquire a legendary character” and “risk losing the intimacy that generational narratives must preserve to enrich and nurture personal history” (Harb, 2008, para. 8). I knew I wanted more information or more existential knowledge of the times I shared with my father. Yet I did not know how this was to happen. Also, I had a sense that there were habits of thought that kept me from seeing the past with fresh eyes, and I wanted

somehow to be free from these habits so I could learn more.

Again, literary *métissage* steps in to be the way and the guide. I quote Harb once more, as this is the core of what has been happening with regards to the way I view my selves. “*Métissage* is a praxis based on the personal and serves to shape a space for the articulation of new visions of the self in ways that bypass traditional hierarchies and dichotomies” (Harb, 2008, para. 7). In some way, it became possible for me to see my father and me as two equal human beings and not simply entrenched in the roles which we played in our lives together. The process of literary *métissage* had freed up my perspective on self and that in turn had an impact on how I viewed Dad. I was able to go back and see each of us separate from the roles of father and daughter. It became possible to see Dad outside of the particular role of the alcoholic father. I had been stuck in a dualistic perspective which dictated that he was the errant one and I was the righteous one in our exchanges. This, along with a continued journaling and reflecting, made it possible for me to stop seeing myself as the righteous and spiritual one. According to the dualistic perspective, the terms good and bad would apply to us. I see now that they are useless terms for human beings. This has been such a rich insight for me and continues to affect my conscious representation and interpretation of selves. We were there together pursuing truth. Being able to be present in this live memory made it possible for me to see beyond Dad being the one in need of healing and me the one with the healing at hand. I was able to see that God was as much present in Dad’s posing of questions as God was in my efforts to share my experience of God with Dad.

Literary métissage purposefully reorganizes power configurations and hierarchies. This makes room for more freedom and fewer conflicts in the making and sharing of knowledge. In this way, métissage lives in a third space which eludes categorization and rejects rigid identity and provides the possibility of enjoying difference in a non-hierarchical way (Harb, 2008).

Literary Métissage and the Epistemological Subject

Knowing and accepting that “all knowledge is necessarily marked by the knower” (Breuner & Wolff-Michael, 2003, para. 2), I set out to know more about my father, God and myself. I knew that in the end, whatever knowledge or insight I discovered would be indelibly imprinted with traces of my identity at the time of research. I attempted to clarify who I was at the starting point in an effort to reveal all of my subjectivities. I had no idea at the time that this process was going to open me up in any significant way. I still had a very rigid view of myself and I thought that I was essentially the way I should be. Perhaps that is why the experience of spiritually surrendering my identity was so terrifying.

I write because I want to understand what happened. I write to explore my feelings around the experiences I am writing about. I write to understand my selves, then and now, and to understand my father. I write to understand God. I write from a position of love and seeking more love for myself and for my father. I write in the hopes that this journey will help me to feel the love of God. I did not know this when I started out, but inside me all of the time was a latent desire for change and self-growth, despite my rigidity. I had no idea that by coming to understand an evolving flexibility of self that I would be able to enter into the past in a new way and that re-entry would make further change possible and palatable. This only rose to the surface after much of the writing had already taken place. In the end, my three paths of inquiry were agents in the process.

Autobiography and the Concern of Family

The struggle of how to deal with the feelings of family members is something that I wrestled with for a long time in the writing of my work. I needed to work it out to a certain point before I could even begin. It was such a major concern that it had stifled my writing. This is a common experience for life writers. William Zinsser (1998) declares, “[W]hen I first started writing that memoir I was half paralyzed by the awareness that my parents and sisters were looking over my shoulder, if not actually perched there” (p.11). These could have been my exact words. As a matter of fact, once when I was reading through my work, I thought I had written that statement. As I attempted to begin writing, I could not get my brothers and sisters out of my mind. I worried about how they would feel about what I included and excluded, and I worried about what they would think of the quality of my work. I was concerned about what Dad’s brothers and sisters would think, too. Then, as I began to write, the problem stayed with me. It is the subject of the Researcher’s Notebook from August 20. After considerable rumination, I decided that, “yes, this family would predictably have difficulty with me sharing about my emotional experience as Dad’s daughter.” I am still dealing with this concern as I am nearing the final stages of my writing. These fears and doubts were formidable company for much of my writing. I needed to work diligently to ground myself in the moment and in my motivation, which is love, in order to deal with this impediment to writing.

The pain of the writing has come in waves through the months of writing. I recognize what Louise De Salvo (2000) claims for the process of writing, “[W]riting regularly fosters resilience - a quality that enables people subjected to difficulties to thrive despite them...beginning to write about a painful experience signals that we have chosen hope rather

than despair” (p. 73). I know that my heart has been heavier than usual in the writing of these stories. I accept that now and recognize it as evidence that I am caring and that I am carrying the weight. My soul is still engaged in this ordeal with my father and this extends to other veterans and their children. My concern is that they not be alone and that they know they are not alone with the weight of their past. Let us shoulder this burden together.

Reified Stories and What We Do Not Remember

In Teresa Strong-Wilson’s book, *Bringing Memory Forward* (2008), she explains how teachers tend to have a problem writing their stories when they try to reach a high literary standard. Strong-Wilson worked with a group of white teachers who taught on First Nations Reservations. In the attempt to go back into their memories, teachers must resist the desire for literary merit to overwhelm the concern for critical thought (p.11). The repetition of the stories of my talks with Dad over the years had the effect of polishing them; they became smoother each time I told them. In addition to the issue of literary aspirations being sometimes problematic to a critical consciousness, Strong-Wilson addresses the problem of breaking the shell which is formed around our stories as we retell them throughout our lives; she is also concerned with what we do not remember, or what we might be ignoring at the time of the original experience. She calls these counter-memories. To discover counter-memories, Strong-Wilson lays out a plan to help teachers go back in memory and see what they were not seeing at the time of the story they are recounting. Strong-Wilson hopes to raise consciousness in teachers, particularly white teachers, regarding power structures and the First Nations populations they teach. This seems to

contradict Davis' (1995) approach to working with memory, where she writes "I have been trying to tell this story as accurately as I can, but I may be mistaken about some of it, and I know I have left things out and added things, both deliberately and accidentally" (p. 228). Yet it isn't an encyclopedic history of the events that Strong-Wilson is going after, but rather a critical consciousness of the experiences in question. To begin this, she poses questions from Grumet and Kamler: "What is powerful? What is omitted? What doesn't fit? Which clichés gloss over experiences?" (p.12). She asks teachers questions to promote critical thinking about their writing so that they may go back and see the past in a different light.

In my retelling of stories of my past, it was necessary to experience something of a counter-memory as well. My counter-memory was elicited by repeat visits to the site of my memories with Dad. Although the memories were very vibrant to me, there seemed to be a shell, almost a force-field around them. They were teeming with raw emotion, but when I began to use language to get at them I would fall into patterns and be dissatisfied with the results. I couldn't get in. True to Strong-Wilson's insight, the better I told the story, the less truth came out. The solution lay in how these repeat visits were coupled with regular reflection on my reading of those events and a constant conscious search for meaning of how they affected my past and my present. Eventually, clichés were broken and I do think I was able to deal with some of the most powerful parts of my relationship with my father from that time.

I had always reflected on the time I shared with my father. I thought deeply about it, but I never, until this year when I wrote about it, saw how the church had played such a powerful role in my thinking. I need to be clear here: I do not mean that God had misbehaved, so to speak. I mean that I had read the church in such a way that it impacted the conversations with my father and how I interpreted the talks we had. It affected how I read my world even up to today. This is

a very important insight for me.

Memoir: Selecting, Remembering and Reflecting

William Zinsser (1998), the editor of *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, offers an explication of memoir: “[M]emoir narrows the lens, focusing on a time in the writer’s life that was unusually vivid, such as a childhood or adolescence, or that was framed by war or travel or public service or some special circumstance” (p.15). The memories which I have selected to write about are vivid in my mind, almost electric. The conversations Dad and I had about war and God were my prime areas of research. As I wrote about them and reflected in the context of my day-to-day life, I became aware that the process of writing and reflecting was opening me up to change. The various selves which constitute me were being held under the light and I was seeing things I had not seen before about my selves.

Also, in telling certain stories and leaving many others untold, I have selected what to share based on what resonated for me around the particular world I lived in with my father when we explored that terrain of questions and pain. I have included writing that gives context to those times and presents more of my childhood selves. These stories which are not central to the themes of Dad and Donna are important because they shed light on the girl who even now is trying so hard to understand and be understood. Donald. M. Murray (1991) says that everything we write is telling our story in some way: “[M]y autobiography exists in the examples of writing I use in this piece and in the text I weave around them...Those of us who write only have a few topics” (p. 67).

Subjectivity begins as we choose what to focus on, first in our thinking and then in our

writing. Leggo (2009) elaborates on the dilemma the writer deals with in selecting what to write about and what to exclude:

One of the ongoing challenges in our writing is trying to sort out what is true and what is not. This is, of course, the central question of epistemology, and certainly a question that all of us ask all of the time. As we write about family and personal experiences, we realize that we are always keeping so much secret. For every experience and emotion and event that we write about, we also hold back so much more, as if we are not ready to share most secrets (p. 152).

As I considered this, it became clear to me that it was indeed necessary to include stories about me when I was younger, even ones which did not focus on Dad or our conversations. They were needed to contextualize the self that was there during the talks with Dad. What is more, including the stories and rereading the stories made it possible for my identity to become more malleable as I read and wrote. Indeed, I believe the dynamic that has begun will play into my future in a powerful way.

As I wrote and then later read through these stories about myself, I recognized that there were elements of these experiences which in effect labeled me. These labels persist to this day. This knowledge has not produced a sudden freedom from any unwanted notions of who I am, but rather it has brought about a growing consciousness of my identities. A rereading of *“Researcher’s Notebook: (N.D.) I Can’t Write”*, *“One More Silence – Dumbness”*, *“Donna’s Stories: Noticed by My Absence”*, *“No More Goodnight Kisses”*, *“Judy’s Wedding”*, *“Cleanliness is Next to Godliness”*, *“The Three Little Pigs”*, *“Donna Messer Rides Again!”*, and *“The Black Sheep of the Family”*, showed me why the labels dumb, fat, clumsy, the black sheep, the good one, and Donna Messer may still impact me today. As I began this journey, I was in process of surrendering myself to God to see who I was meant to be. I can see now that these labels are things I surrendered. I may not choose to pick them up again.

All Autobiographical Writing is Fictional

In writing about myself and my life, I realized there is much that I am blind to and much that I have chosen to exclude from this work. I acknowledge that in attempting to depict a true image of myself I will only be able to get so close; there will never be a historically accurate depiction of me in my writing. I considered the concepts of self offered by other life writers and felt released into this work without undo concern for accuracy. I am now more concerned in matters of truth. I recognize the wisdom in what Barthes says: “[Y]ou are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror lens...” (as cited in Leggo, 2004, p. 1). This seems obvious to me now, and irrefutable. Knowing that I would not be able to capture the whole story, or even the complete picture of myself, had a relaxing effect on my writing. I was able to see what was most important in the writing and sharpen my sense of purpose. That, in turn, had an impact on my view of myself not only in the past, but in the present.

Too often we fail to understand the complex ways in which we compose and recompose our sense of identity. We need to acknowledge how our identity is always malleable and changing. Otherwise, we can get stuck in a rigid and singular position of identity, and fail to pursue creative possibilities for potential new identities (Leggo, 2004, p. 116).

I laugh now to remember that when I first read this work by Carl Leggo, I thought, “Hmmm, interesting, but I don’t think I need to have a flexible view of myself because I like how I am now.” This was before I began writing this thesis, while I was exploring the literature. What is so fascinating to me is that the mere act of writing and reflecting has opened me up in such a real way. Now when I read the above quote, I rejoice. It is not that I have a supremely

flexible notion of my selves now, but rather, that I have begun to reconsider my selves, the roles that I play, and search for a more continuous self to inhabit throughout. Change is not such a scary thing anymore, I see it more now as a natural and healthy way of being or becoming.

This recognition of change as a welcome element is new and came out of the work of writing and reflecting. My life came to imitate my art in an interesting and synergistic way. My creating was the catalyst for the change which began in my 'real' selves. As I began to understand the various selves which I have portrayed over the years and which served me as lenses through which to read my world, and very importantly, read the conversations between my father and myself, my critical consciousness of those selves expanded. I developed a dislike for certain aspects of these lenses and that gave me an open mind when I went back again to revisit the stories of Dad and me. In a sense, this consciousness raising has helped me to recreate my past and I believe it will help me to mold a different future than would have been otherwise possible.

I have traveled back for different reasons to these talks with Dad many times over the years. Sometimes to try and understand myself, sometimes to understand what happened, and sometimes I go back there because it was, although incredibly painful, the most truthful and perhaps the most loving time I ever spent with my father. It was the only time I spent with him alone where he was really communicating. So when I go back to those times, I am with him in a way that is powerful, even alive. I suggest that it is alive because it opens me up to the dynamic of change. Depending on the mental and spiritual space I am in when I remember our talks, different aspects of different truths present themselves to me. The times when I have revisited our talks and have seen new sides to both my father and myself have been when I approached these memories with an open spirit and an open mind. To get to that state, I needed to deal with

the fear of dealing with such a heavy burden, especially within the experience of my first sustained attempt at writing.

There were times when Dad came to rescue me from some predicament I had gotten myself into and we had a long drive together. He was usually as silent as a wall. I refer to one of these times in the “*Personal Journal Entry: If You Forget My love, I’ll Try to Remind You.*” Another time of extended silence was during his last days, when I sat beside his bed as he lay dying. The whole time I was somehow deluding myself that he wasn’t going to die. While he was on his deathbed he was losing the function of different parts of his brain, one at a time. The only communication I got from him then was him holding my hand. I don’t know if I ever held Dad’s hand other than at that time. I have told the story of the time when my younger brother Carl came in to see him and he ripped off a piece of a brown paper bag and wrote down “Donna is A1”. He handed it to Carl and Carl passed it to me. These moments still shine in my memory. But this time that I have chosen to explore in my thesis was different and real: Dad was talking and listening and so was I. The walls that normally existed between us were down for that time. And although the conversation may have only happened because Dad had too much to drink, the conversation was lucid, truthful and necessary. And if it was alcohol that helped my father unburden himself, then I am grateful for it.

A good memoir requires two elements - one of art and the other craft. The first element is *integrity of intention*. Memoir is the best search mechanism that writers are given. Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us. If a writer seriously embarks on that quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own. The other element is carpentry... memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing a narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With a feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events (Zinsser, 1998, p.6).

Love was my motivator when I began to write this story. My paths of inquiry pivot on love. I embarked on this journey to see if there was more love for me to find between my father and myself. On the voyage I hoped to find more of God's love for me. These deeply rooted desires stirred my soul to begin the quest. The writing continued over many months, leading into a couple of years. As I regularly picked up new threads to braid in from my current life I began to understand more of who I am now and who I was then. I began to see that I was attempting to understand myself in an important way. I wanted to have the perspicacity to be able to view my childhood self with love and truth. Going back to certain events over and over again has helped provide some of the desired clarity. I am learning a dearly held respect for my own values and for the way that I have helped my father. There is no one else who could tell this story.

Dillard (cited in Zinsser, 1998) writes that every memoir writer must decide two things: what to put in and what to leave out. She explains that memoir writers change some of the details for different reasons, sometimes for mere convenience. As the writer you can make things easier for the reader by letting the writing flow. It is not necessary to interrupt the text to say that some of your facts aren't exactly facts. Dillard goes on to add, "[Y]ou have to take pains in a memoir not to hang on the reader's arm like a drunk and say, 'and then I did this and it was so interesting'" (as cited in Zinsser, 1998, p. 154). The author's undeniable ability to decide what parts of a story are pertinent and what parts are superfluous highlights another reason why all life-writing must be fictitious in some way. We cannot record every angle of each situation which we explore in our writing, we can only tell parts of a story.

For this reason I have excluded the minutiae of our day-to-day life and any stories which are not centered around either my father or myself. Family members will likely be disappointed that certain well-loved family stories were excluded from my work. There may be another time

for these other stories, and I suspect there will be, but my research questions were regarding Dad and God determined what was needed and what was superfluous to the work at hand. There is other information which I could gather from my family about Dad. There are several people who have had talks with Dad about the war. Their talks were much different from the ones I had. This is also extraneous to the questions which drove me to write. Perhaps because of the role I was playing at the time as the devout one in the family, I think somehow Dad sought me out to have this dialogue. Or maybe it was despite that.

Cole and Knowles (2001) suggest that all memory is not only partial and in some way selective, it is also thereby something the mind creates or rebuilds out of the past. This qualifies any memory work as fiction. I had the most wonderful expectant feeling when I first thought I could communicate with Donald M. Murray. When I discovered that he had passed away, I did not want to let the idea of corresponding with him die. So I chose to fictionalize letters to and from him. These letters are based on his writing yet in the work they appear as if he had in fact written to me about his wartime experiences. Aside from this fictionalizing, there are many details which may be pertinent but are long forgotten. I must be satisfied that my heart has remembered what was crucial for this part of my life journey.

Form and Representation in Life Writing

The Epistemological Object and Expressing the Inexpressible

In life writing, the epistemological object (the known) is acted upon by the epistemological subject (the knower). Everything I know about my father and myself is linked to

who I was and what else was going on around me and within me at the time. It continues to be affected by the selves which carry me through the present. In looking back over this part of my life, this part of me that I have written about, I am overwhelmed with gratitude. For the lone bird which just dropped by my feeder, for my sister, Ellen, who gave me the feeder, for my Aunt Myrtle who inspires us all to watch the birds, for my friend Elizabeth who just came by to deliver a care package which includes an interactive journal. For the love that stands outside and inside all of this, I am grateful. This love soothes me as I carry the burden of memory. This love and the gratitude I feel for being connected to it has always been at the core of my thesis writing, it has been, and will continue to be, my greatest epistemological object. What I know is love. What I choose to know is love. And, after much searching and researching, I have found not only that it is my answer to many of my own questions, but that it suffices. It is why I wanted to write about Dad. It is why I wanted to write about God. It is why I wanted to reflect so intimately, and intuition drove the writing. I believe that God was behind the urge to reflect, that God was behind the drive for self-examination which made it possible for me to see things differently, both then and now, and to see me differently, both then and now.

In the journal entry, "*How Can I Tell You What We Didn't Say?*", I wonder how I will be able to communicate what was said in the pauses, what was said in our eyes, in our body language, in our sighs and tears. I have carried these memories around with me for more than thirty years. It has taken me this long to begin to write about Dad, this long even to begin to write. "I look back...and I know it can take a lifetime to convey what you mean, to find the opening. You watch, you set it down. Then you try again" (Lopez, 1998, p. 15). I know I have waited too long, yet the time is right. I also know that although I have "set it down," I will go through this story again.

In my poem, "*The Truth*", I consider the different truths my father and I held and the battle they waged against each other to win the title of The Truth. This notion of truth, of differing viewpoints on a subject, is an issue life writers frequently need to address (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Not only do we have this problem of authentically presenting more than one answer to a query, but there is much else that needs to be seriously considered. My aim was not to say that one of us was right and the other wrong, but rather to tell both of our stories, our truths, compassionately, respectfully and truthfully. Sherwood & Freshwater (2009) explain their own search, "[T]here is no objective truth to be found. We are exploring multiple aspects of a complex life through the lenses of our own lives" (p. 64). In my search I have similarly given up the notion of one ultimate truth, and in that surrendering I have found new truths that I may not have been able to see otherwise. I recognize that even back then the air resonated with both of our truths and that one did not negate the other. When I listened to Dad's stories and had no answer that did not mean that he won that particular round in our discussions. I see now that what really happened was that my silence was an acknowledgement of his truth.

The Interplay between Intention and Representation

Natalie Goldberg (2007) advises: "[L]et your mind first believe you are dedicated, that you sincerely want the truth, are willing to take what comes through" (p. 4). I certainly had no idea of the kinds of things I would find out about myself when I started on this journey. I made the commitment, unknowingly but sincerely. What came through at the end was a message strong and clear, saying that love won. I was dedicated, I risked coming back from this journey

empty handed, yet that was not the case. Part of the experience of writing about difficult experiences is that the writer has the final say, before she leaves it for the reader to interpret, about what actually happened (De Salvo, 1999). I get to say that what my father shared with me was a gift, even if it was a burden as well. I will even say that I see triumph in the moments of sharing, yet it is not triumph in the way we normally think of triumph, full of splendour. Everything was not perfect.

Why would I think my story was important enough to share? In Marion Stordy's (2008) Master's thesis, she refers to herself as the Ancient Mariner, explaining, "[L]ike the protagonist in Coleridge's poem, I, too, feel compelled to tell my story. The albatross around my neck may not be as visible to the naked eye as the bird which the Ancient Mariner of Coleridge's poem was forced to carry, yet it is just as real" (p. 1). I too, write to unburden myself, to lay down the weight of what I have carried for so long. For Stordy (2008), the albatross is "the misery endured by many school children who are labeled Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder..." (p. 1). My 'albatross' is the agony contained in the memories of stories shared with my father. Stordy shared her story in the hope that it would bring about change for ADHD children. This is what Natalie Goldberg (2007) is referring to when she says, "[M]emoir is taking personal experience and turning it inside out. We surrender our most precious understanding, so others can feel what we feel and be enlarged" (p. 146). One reason I shared my story is to enlarge the emotional space for hearing such stories, that they might be received with loving hearts. I want people to have more compassion for veterans and more understanding for the difficulty they have as they try to live a peaceful, civilian life.

Representation as Process Rather Than Form

The writing has taken place over a few years and has occurred organically. This is in keeping with the tradition of life writing and with literary métissage. “Autobiography and life writing are “organic” genres in a state of perpetual flux, constantly transforming and interpenetrating the permeable borders around them.” (Haebe-Ludt, Chambers, Leggo, 2009, p. 17). Intuition, not an outline, was my guide for what to write during the process of most of the creative writing. One piece of writing would prompt the next, or sometimes a piece of writing was borne out of something that happened at school with my students.

I want to draw attention to the distinctly subjective nature of knowledge, especially in the area of life writing. I do not wish to be objective, if that were possible. I take a constructionist view of knowledge, which is to say that I believe that all knowledge is affected in some way by the possessor of that knowledge. This constructionist epistemology rests on the “fundamentally situated and contingent nature of knowledge” (Breuner & Wolff-Michael, 2003, para. 10).

For this reason, it is crucial that my methodology follows from this perspective on knowledge. The methodology must involve reflecting and decentering for the researcher (Breuner & Wolff-Michael, 2003, para. 18). I had to include The Researcher’s Notebook and Personal Journal Entries as this was where my decentering and reflecting was being recorded.

Representation, Genre, and Modes of Inquiry

Choosing poetry as a tool to communicate my talks with my father was in some ways not a choice but a recognition. I acknowledged again that existence is poetic and that the experiences

I wanted to share were beyond the ken of a narrative as I knew the form. So any narratives I wrote would be imbued with my poetic filter. I also realized my stories needed something of the amorphous quality of poetry. I needed it to be able to go back and research my selves. I needed a poetic gaze to be able to go back and see my times with my father more fully.

Sameshima (2007) delineates some fundamental premises for her epistolary book, *Seeing Red: A Pedagogy of Parallax*. She states that methodology is linked to representational form and that a change in format or the type of writing can allow for new possibilities for inquiry since the function and the content depend on the form (p. 1). Had I written the stories as clearly as I remembered them in a linear fashion, much would have been lost. I had a tremendous amount of fear at the prospect of doing anything other than that as I had never explored any other type of writing in any significant way. As I wove in pieces of poetry and pieces of narrative, I began to be able to see more clearly the value in the sharing between me and my father. The poetry connected to the narrative illuminated truths of love and spirit which may not have held sufficient credence even with me. One of my first concerns was how to express what was not spoken between my father and me. How would I say what stood in the silences between us, between our words? I came to a place where I know that what occurred between my father and me was a gift to both of us. I am also recognizing it as a good part of my life's soul work. If I had not revisited the stories as I continued to reflect and write, and if I had not allowed such a long period of time to pass during the writing, I would not have had the opportunity to learn what I have learned about my selves. I would not have gained this flexible view of who I am and who I am becoming.

Threshold

In my first piece, "*Threshold*", I wait outside the beginning of my work and invite the reader to pause there. I pause to gather strength and compose myself. I pause to make sure I am ready to be present to the past which I am embarking on a journey to explore. This threshold where I linger is a common rest stop for life writers. As a new writer, I feel a welcome sense of communion in knowing that. We stop to ponder just what lies ahead, what lies behind us and what lies within us. We stop to be open to the moment, what we are experiencing at the threshold. Do I want to go in? What will I do? How will I deal with this now that I have changed since I first experienced this part of my story?

Carolyn Heilbrun (1999) describes this as "the condition of liminality" (p. 3). The word *limen* means threshold, being in the state of liminality means that one is on uncertain ground and in the moment of leaving one place and entering another. She notes that one key aspect of this state is "its unsteadiness, its lack of clarity about where one belongs and what one should be doing" (p. 3).

The Conversation Begins

As I prepared myself to write about these conversations, there were many issues that came to the fore to plague me that had to be dealt with before the writing could happen. There was the problem of remembering and forgetting. There was the problem of telling the whole truth when part of that truth might connect deeply to the truth of others. And there was the simple question of why I would think my story was important enough to share.

Memory is an issue for anyone who wants to do life writing. As I have recorded in

“Researcher’s Notebook, August 29, 2009,” I was heartened by Lydia Davis’s (1995) meandering through memory in her novel, *The End of the Story*. Davis is trying to tell the story of a love affair and cannot remember many of the details. Her novel ends up being about her processing of memories she does retain and the life she is living around that processing. The journal excerpts that mention my reading the novel show how that affected my approach to my own work and working with memory. I realized that it was not pivotal that I remember exactly every detail of the times I was writing about. For Davis and for myself, there were aspects of the stories that we could not get away from. For Davis, she had been obsessive at the end of a love affair. For myself, I had been ruminating over things my father had told me thirty five years ago about war and God. These essential truths were what most of the writing would center on.

Carl Leggo (2005) offers an interesting and liberating approach to life writing. When he discusses the problem of presenting the whole truth of your life, he explains that he presents reality as a fiction. The self is one of the aspects of that fiction. “I write autobiographical poetry and narratives in which “fictional” characters appear in real form. Too often we fail to recognize how we compose and recompose our sense of identity” (p. 117). As we write and explore creatively what it is we want to say, we find new possibilities which may hold truth even though they are fictions. Patrick Lewis (2010) suggests that as we work imaginatively in narrative, we become able “to actualize new discoveries” and this becomes real as we see the narrative journey through to the end (p. 1). Again, it occurred to me that the writing I was called to do did not require a perfect memory or a verbatim transcript of conversations I had with Dad.

Narratives of the World, for the World

Some parts of my story seemed best told in a simple narrative. And while I will hold that all of my work is narrative in that each piece tells a story, there were separate events which lent themselves more comfortably to a communal story. The unfolding of the evenings and the conversations seemed appropriate for this form. I knew this was not a completely unique story. Many men had returned from war and had families and some of those families probably had some experiences that were similar to mine. I listen closely when Leggo (2008) says:

There are really only a few stories.... We all share experiences of desire, fear, relationship, birth and death, pain and fear, joy and sorrow. So we are not going to learn a great deal that is startlingly new from listening to another person's story. ... The real purpose in telling our stories is to tell them in ways that open up new possibilities for understanding and wisdom and transformation (p. 7).

I have shared how telling these stories has given me opportunities for insight and for transformation. I would be satisfied if my stories made someone's heart more open to either a veteran or a child of a veteran, or if there was an opening of the heart towards anyone. In the end, the fact that my story had been experienced in some ways by others and may have been told by another writer, did not detract from the relevance of the work, but rather added to my sense of communion. It added to the veracity of my experience. Finally, it added to my desire to be heard. There has been a revealing of new wisdom and an opening for transformation. The work that has been done on my inner self or selves has been instrumental in illuminating several other areas of my life, several selves which I portray. Leah Fowler (2010) praises narrative work for just this reason: "[N]arrative research... can help us balance our inner government of self, help us become mindful, and assist positive change in practice..." (para. 2). Even as I approach the end of this work, I am certain that the narrative that has unfolded will continue to bring me new

treasures since it has been through dealing with my past that I have become freer to live in my present.

I am developing a sense of personal agency as I am able to see my acts as choices. I can see that I have been making some choices unconsciously and now I can choose to do otherwise. In the past, my role was 'the good one.' This was true in the talks with Dad. I know that I saw myself as an agent of the church and that was even tied to certain people within the church. I am glad that things were illuminated so that I could see that I was actually operating at times as if I was working for the church and not out of a distinct and autonomous relationship with God. It was as if I was going to report on what occurred between my father and me. I saw how it continued and how it impacted my behavior. Seeing this freed me to be able to revisit my past, to go back and imagine other than one interpretation. I was there in the kitchen, so long ago, for myself, for my father, for love and for God. In this way, "understanding the past's presence functioned as a midwife to the birth of the future by enabling agency" (Pinar, 2010, para.3).

A Compassionate View

In the telling of times with Dad, I hope to create a new view for the reader. I think about my father and realize I have been yearning for him to be re-seen by everyone. My wish is that he will be seen with different eyes, through a different lens. I want the reader to feel deeply for him. Not only for him, but for other veterans who may have carried their experience with them in such a painful, solitary way. I feel the way Dorothy Allison (1996) describes in Ruth Behar's book, *The Vulnerable Observer*, when she says, "[W]hen I sit down to make my stories I know very well that I want to take the reader by the throat, break her heart, and heal it again" (p. 207). There

is nothing maudlin or sadistic in the way I am heartened when I read some of my work and I see people's eyes well up with tears. For me, that is a sure sign that they are connecting with my story. This is more important than whether they like it. This is crucial to me. As Louise De Salvo (1999) writes: "[W]e can ask our listeners not to tell us whether they like our work or they don't, for whether they like it or not can't help us heal... We can ask our readers to help us by letting us know if we are reaching them" (p. 210). When a reader has an emotional response to my words, I feel that there is love and understanding going out to my father and to me. Then I feel as if I were communicating with my father and showing him that he is being given a place of honour. I want to say, "Dad, they do understand. They know now." I think that there is more hope in those moments for compassion towards other veterans and that this compassion may provide good soil for growth and change for the veteran and those who love them.

Poems, Inquiry and Poetic Being

Poetic inquiry "incorporates poetry in some way as a component of an investigation" (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxxv). I have used poetry and a poetic perspective to try and come at some memories from the past. Prendergast elaborates that poetic inquiry shares many traits with narrative inquiry. They both use the literary arts to give an honest representation of the human experience.

In choosing poetry and a poetic perspective for my writing, I made a choice for a frame of mind that would facilitate my exploration and expression of emotional issues. The poetic mindset was particularly well suited to the nature of my investigation. This goes back to the

choice I made in the beginning about what my investigation was going to center on. It was not going to be about the facts of what Dad experienced and verbatim transcripts of our conversations. The inquiry revolved around the essences of the communication we shared. As I considered what approach I was going to take to the stories, a friend advised me about all of the background work that was necessary. I was told that I needed to get Dad's war records, find out what specific battles he fought in, find out everything I could about the history of those battles, and get as much peripheral information as I could. I followed that trail for a while, until I came to a dead end. While I was waiting for some information regarding Dad's overseas travels, it occurred to me that there was nothing that I needed that I did not already have. Everything I needed was within. It was vital for me to begin to trust my own perspectives, to begin to have autonomy over my inquiry processes. It called me back to the way I felt when I was very young, before the talks with Dad when I felt drawn to writing and shied away. I know that as I rejected writing as a possibility for myself, I was making a choice to follow what was on the outside rather than what was on the inside. I was choosing to follow the black-and-white truth that was agreed upon and without, rather than the colourful lived experience within. The road I was following at first was in search of "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." I realized that there was no such thing to go after. No matter what information I uncovered, I would never have it all, and what became the most dominant force in my writing was the story as I saw it, and the story, as close as I could fathom, to how my father saw it. So the investigation has started an independence of spirit within me that was birthed in the writing but extends to my whole life. It reaches to the discontinuity which I have referred to in my several roles and, I trust, to some resolution of that in a harmonious mindset.

There were aspects of Dad's sharing and aspects of my memories which were simply not

suited to anything other than poetry. Yet I wish for my whole work to be seen poetically.

What poetry offers, then, is not a form of abstract, quantifiable knowledge, like scientific findings, that can be amassed and advanced. Instead, through the convenient portability of words, it offers a semblance of direct experience, a recovery of approximation of emotional experience that engages our sense of the numinous and the aesthetic. It reorganizes and deepens our awareness of our past experience and kindles our appetite for future experience. It sharpens our sense of vitality and mortality (Steffler, as quoted in Leggo, 2004, p. 4).

This reorganizing of my past has proven to be important in recreating myself. I have been recreated in new perspectives. I chose to see life poetically. Before this endeavor to write about such an important part of my life, I was at war with the poetic lens. I thought that it was reserved for the chosen few, those who had earned it and kept it by the Poetic Powers That Be. Yet I felt drawn to poetry. An idea for a poem or poetic writing would occur to me, and I would dismiss it, thinking that I did not have what it takes to be able to write about what it was that I was experiencing. I had a poetic state of mind, yet I fought against it, I did not want to be seen as trespassing somewhere I did not belong. As John Steffler explains, “poetry is first of all a state of mind. Before it is a verbal structure, it’s a way of seeing and perceiving and interacting with the world, including oneself, one’s own life” (cited in Leggo, 2004, p. 6). Barbara Kingsolver describes the birth of a poem: “I rarely think of a poem as something I make happen; it is more accurate to say that it is something that happens to *me*” (cited in Leggo, 2004, p. 6).

In the past, poems would try to “happen” to me, but I resisted. I thought of how terrible it would be if what I wrote was not well received or I could not express what I wanted to say. I realize now that the concern about whether or not my work is well received is secondary. I could not even begin to write until I had shelved that concern. What was of ultimate importance was that I became capable of expressing myself. I could only pay attention to my audience after I had

dealt with that. Now that I have told my story, I am able to consider my audience again. But concerns about not meeting someone's aesthetic standard do not have the potential to stop me anymore. I believe that practice will help me grow in my ability to satisfyingly convey truths to even a selective audience. But I must start from where I am.

Memory and the Poetics of Literary Métissage

So I travel with a heart that is prone to linger. I am seeking a maturing of my selves in this new exploration. "Poetry becomes a site for uncovering the self and in some ways recovering the self" (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009, para. 68). It is in the reading and writing praxis of métissage that I have been able to open up to my different selves and to be open to others having various selves as well. "Métissage enables researchers and their audiences to imagine and create plural selves..." (Chambers et al. 2008, p.142). This cannot be rushed, but happens in step with my present living and reflecting. By remembering these stories as I lived them and recalling the girl I was, I am able to gain a new understanding of my past like Paulo Freire (2007), who speaks of reviewing his own life:

This man of today sees the child of yesterday in himself and learns to see better what he had seen before. To see again what had been seen before implies seeing angles that were not perceived before. Thus, a posterior view of the world can be done in a more critical, less naïve, and more rigorous way (p. 38).

I had always seen beauty and light in my talks with my father, but that was soaked in pain. Now I see a beauty that stands separate from the pain and will support me well in my new choice to live bravely, poetically.

This voyage is not easy. In the end, I wonder if I let go of some of the pain of the past as

I traveled through the kitchen again and shared that space with the ghost of my father. I did not rush through, I moved slowly, expectantly. Like Leggo (2007), “I linger with memory and emotion and heart and story” (p. 194). I am waiting for something to rise to the surface. Or I am waiting to see something I was not able or willing to see before. I continue this dreamlike walk through the past. I know I am being led as I travel back again. My invisible guide illuminates the mystery that will remain.

I have needed to go deep into these well worn memories to be present with my father once again during the process of writing these stories. As Janet Varner Gunn (1982) describes the process, “[A]utobiography is a presencing, in Augustine’s words, of “man in his deep.” What is made present is not merely a past that is past. What is presenced is a reality, always new, to which the past has contributed but which stands, as it were, in front of the autobiographer” (p. 17). I have felt the presence of this past persist into my continued presents. As the singer Feist (2007) declares: “[T]here’s so much past inside my present.” Not that I think I will ever be free of these memories, nor am I even sure that I would want to be, but I do know that I have needed to see them again and in a new way get past some of the burden I have been carrying.

Reflexivity with Self and Others in Life Writing

Reflexivity can be described as actively weaving threads of the self and threads of the self as others see them. Much of the change which I have experienced has come out of reflection which only involves me. Yet this reflection has always connected with others in my reflexive praxis of writing, living and loving. “Reflexivity develops through contact with others, in which

we compare our current conceptions with new information and perspectives. It is through the juxtaposition of the two, which often reveals their incompatibility” (Page & Curran, 2010, para. 23) which necessitates a closer look at some of our basic assumptions. This leads to further self study and possible transformation (Page & Curran, 2010, para. 3). In my stories of my father I held one specific view of myself and of him when I began. I wrote the stories and left them while I went about the work of life. When I came back to the stories, there had been a shift in the lens through which I was looking at those events. I was able to have a more flexible view of the truth, and embrace both mine and my father’s. There was also a more flexible view of myself, however hard won. There was an inner process of change which had begun. Carl Leggo (2005) addresses this issue of the necessity of connecting with others: “[W]hat is needed in order to create communion is communication, a practice of testimony, an ongoing commitment to autobiographical communication, not as an act of self-aggrandizement or self-deprecation, but as a self-reflexive investigation in collaboration with others who agree to listen and respond and explore their autobiographies too” (p. 125).

Leggo (2005) continues by quoting Paulo Freire, “I must not become passionately closed within myself. It is necessary that I open myself to knowledge and refuse to isolate myself within the circle of my own truth or reject all that is different from it or from me” (p. 125). I must refer back to my confession that when I began my research, I resisted the idea that I needed to change. This was at the same time that I was praying that God would take me seriously when I said I wanted to surrender every part of me. I had no idea how rigid I was, and I had no idea how that was hampering my communion with others. I am grateful that I was opened to the beginning of transformation. In my rigidity, I was not allowing others the freedom to be who they were. Joanne MacNevin posits, “[O]ur identities are mutually constructed” (personal communication,

January 31, 2011). This connects with what Freire says about the mutuality of being, “I like being a person precisely because of my ethical and political responsibility before the world and other people. I cannot be if others are not; above all, I cannot be if I forbid others from being” (as cited in Leggo, 2005, p. 125). I see an opening here. I joyfully consent to come along on this voyage, to continue this journey that has started as a result of this writing and my spiritual seeking. I rejoice in joining the communion of autobiographical writers and want to hear what they are all saying and respond to it. I feel an impetus to extend this experience to my students, to have them write meaningfully about their lives and to teach them to value this writing as a life-learning practice.

All Writing is Autobiographical

While Donald Murray (1991) recognizes the fiction inherent in any autobiographical writing, he also makes a strong case for the autobiographical nature of all writing. The way that we express ourselves in words is autobiographical, even if we are not writing an autobiographical piece. In our writing style, or voice, we will be heard. Our way of seeing the world will be the lens through which the reader will view the events of our stories. He says our writing is autobiographical as well in the subject matter we explore in our writing. “Our autobiography grows from a few deep taproots that are set down into our past in childhood....Those of us who write have only a few topics” (p. 67). Murray says his various writing pieces “keep returning to my family and my childhood seeking understanding and hoping for a compassion that has not yet arrived..... Another topic I return to is death and illness, religion

and war, a great tangle of themes” (pp. 69-70). Donald Murray and I have these themes in common.

So as I conduct my literary métissage, I am pursuing writing autobiographically, exploring these themes, and developing my voice as I tell my story. There is some pleasure in knowing it is written. And as I tell a part of my father’s story there is peace in knowing it will be heard. As I am finishing all of this searching and re-searching, reflection and reflexive thinking, I trust I will find myself in that space Leah Fowler (2006) describes: “[A] quiet place where we really are mortal and we freely set down our narrative bundles and simply breathe in the miracle of existence as human beings” (p. 31).

What is my Thesis Good For?

The reader may wish at this point for some kind of a summation of my work; there may be a desire for clarity regarding the import of this thesis. Yet poetry is more elusive than that, and as the writing herein has many of the qualities of poetry, I will choose to elude that grasp, to deny a hard account of what has taken place. Does that mean I have lost my concern for a high aesthetic standard? Not at all. I gladly take the freedom offered by writers such as Carl Leggo who responds when asked if a poem is good with another question, “[W]hat is this poem good for?” (2004a, p. 1). I will ask this of all my work. This takes us in an entirely different direction.

The writing journey I have been on will not end here, it will have an impact on the future of how I teach and learn. I am sometimes daunted when I think about the school system as it is now. I cannot help but agree with Maxine Green (2008) who describes the crisis in education not

as if there is an impending catastrophe but a “loss of expectation and a sense of futility” (para. 1). She states that imagination and the arts answer this lack. “Imagination is required to disclose a different state of things, to open the windows of consciousness to what might be, what ought to be. Imagination allows for empathy, for a tuning in to another’s feelings, for new beginnings in transactions with the world” (para. 4).

I wish for this change of consciousness for myself and my students. Like Eisner (2008), “I would argue that one of the qualities we ought to be promoting in schools is a slowing down of perception: the ability to take one’s time, to smell the flowers, to really perceive...” (para. 20). Most importantly, the mindfulness that is called for will allow for love to blossom in the classroom. That is what is needed for lasting, significant education to occur. I need to allow my students the same conditions for growth and exploration which were essential in my life writing experience. It was necessary that I was free to explore and that I felt safe to express myself.

In my experience, the guidance of my advisor Sean Wiebe helped me unbotle my heart as a writer. His urgings to “[W]rite, just write” (personal communication, summer, 2009), helped me get my stories out. The love and support of my friends and family gave me the strength to write my stories with honesty. Love and freedom went hand in hand on this journey. “Taught to believe that the mind not the heart, is the seat of learning, many of us believe that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means we will be perceived as weak and irrational” (hooks as cited in Wiebe & Snowber, 2009) I understand what hooks is saying because I have recognized that attitude among many colleagues and even find I have to fight against it in myself. Yet I believe I need to let this passion flow from me in the classroom in order to truly be and to let my students be free to express themselves in creative ways. I agree with Sameshima who says, “I’m suggesting that when inloveness of educational eros is acknowledged in the dialogic space

between the teacher and the learner, transformational knowing possibilities are greatly enhanced” (2010, para. 5).

This writing which has initiated such transformation in my selves as a thinker and as a writer will undoubtedly bear fruit in my teaching. I know now more than ever that I need to be open as an educator and the head learner in the grade three class where I currently teach. I have needed to be open to my multiple selves and multiple truths of my own experience and that of my father. I wish the same flexibility of perspective for my students. Like Wiebe (2010), I hope that my “students come to believe that something new might arise, and believe in their own imaginations for making that newness possible” (pp. 12-13). A classroom atmosphere which might be fertile for individual growth needs to be rooted in a specific love for each individual in the class and a respect for their differences which they bring into the class dynamic. “As a classroom community our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence (hooks, 1994, p. 8). My heart reaches towards my students as I imagine where they will take poetry, narrative, poetic being and knowing, inquiry of all sorts, life writing, literary métissage and reading their world in the time I have with them. What a gift to have the opportunity to explore this path with these learners. I think of my classroom in the school where I am employed. I think of my daughter as she continues to teach and learn with me. I think of my life as my classroom where I travel with a heart that is prone to linger.

Poem #8: A Heart that is Prone to Linger

I see my work in a moment

Not enough, too much

Lacking finality

Looking for more answers

Tied still to the past

Pain still present

Yet Love soars in the light

I reach out and touch

Something to hold on to

I go back one more time

I see my father

Tied to the past

Pain still present

He reaches out and touches

Something to hold on to

A heart that is prone to linger

And Love soars in the light

Nothing is finished

But, O, how these words

have helped me peel off

layer after layer

Till I see that is the new way

*I let the layers come off
To reveal myself in flow
Perpetually becoming
Who I was meant to be
Who I meant to be
Still tied to the past
Pain still present
Yet Love soars in the light
As I travel with a heart that is prone to linger*

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