

A Tale of Two Schoolings:

A leisure scholar's autoethnographic exploration of different learning settings

by

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

What do homeschooling, public school, leisure studies, and factors such as freedom of choice, trust, and competence have in common? I have been asking myself this question for over a decade now. Or, rather, not so much what do they have in common but where do they intersect and overlap and how do they relate to each other? Looking to explore the relationships between these factors and understand those relationships in more detail, for my doctoral dissertation I undertook this autoethnographic study to explore my own learning experiences in two different settings while looking through the lens of leisure studies scholarship. Embracing the partial, subjective, and personal nature of autoethnography of this sort I hope that this work shares my personal experiences in a rich and evocative manner while also examining and exploring these experiences within a broader sociocultural framework through engagement with my academic background in leisure studies. In particular, my reflections led me to discussing the impact and importance of competence, sense of freedom, and relationships within these learning experiences and how the form and sociological function of school can impact both lived experiences and conceptualizations of learning and development.

## Acknowledgements

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So many people outside of the university have also had a hand in helping me get to this point, I can't possibly convey here in this single page all that my communities have done for me over the years its taken me to finish this degree but I hope they all understand how grateful I am. From making me lunch when deadlines were looming to picking up shifts when the panic really hit, from listening to rants fuelled by frustration and stress to reminding me that I'd get to the end at some point, I want to thank my family at Fionn's, my former league-mates at RCRG, my roommate Graeme (who bore the brunt of the chaos of these final stages of writing and rewriting), and all the other friends and relations who stood by me and cheered me on over the years. Thank you.

I appreciate the love and support of my family in many areas of my life but wanted to say a special thank you for hanging in there with me throughout this process and doing what they could to make the road a little easier: the ceaseless support of my sisters, brothers, aunt and stepmother kept me going when I couldn't see my way out; the wise and patient words of my dad helped me keep perspective on all matters grad-school; and my mom's ever-present voice of love and encouragement brought me back to myself when I'd lost my way. Thank you.

And to you, my dear reader, I also owe a debt. The possibility of you kept me going, the dream of your existence kept me working, and the hope of your engagement kept me inspired. Thank you.

## **Dedication**

I am dedicating this project to my mom. From reading me my first nursery rhymes to supporting me in writing this doctoral dissertation, she's always been my teacher, my friend, and my cheerleader, and her faith and trust in me has made all the difference.

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## **Chapter 1 (*Introduction*): Welcome, come on in, sit down and pull up a chair**

Working my way through three degrees in leisure studies over the past ten years I've been drawn back, time and time again, to the social psychological and sociological exploration of human experience. More specifically, over the course of my studies, when discussing traits and benefits of leisure experiences I've often thought back to my childhood learning experiences and reflected upon my time as both an unstructured homeschooler and a student in a traditional school, drawn to the intersection of concepts we discussed in class (i.e. freedom of choice, autonomy, structure, motivation, self determination, self actualization and optimal human experiences) existing in different capacities in both of those settings. While many leisure scholars have focused their attention on work and how our conceptualizations and experiences of work and leisure contrast, compliment, or compete with each other, I have not found a similar body of work exploring childhood version of work, that of school or primary learning settings, leaving me curious about the various intersections and overlaps I see between these areas. In particular, in classes studying the social psychology of leisure and the role of play and creativity in development I found myself wondering about the role of these kinds of factors in our learning environments, how different experiential traits might impact our learning and how the segmentation of life into different categories (i.e. school/learning versus the rest of life) might change or impact our experiences and conceptualizations of learning and development.

These reflections have led to me ask what would happen if I were to turn my leisure scholar's eye to examine and explore this area? What insight could my unique set of experiences offer regarding experiences of learning settings and the culture within which they occur? How could my story, a counter-narrative experienced by someone who was at once an insider and an



outsider, depending on your perspective, offer a new avenue from which to explore discursive cultural conceptualizations and assumptions? What could be learned by breaking down the traditional objective barriers between spheres of life and looking at learning experiences the same way we look at leisure activities? How do experiential traits discussed in leisure literature play out, inform and influence experiences of learning within broader life contexts?

For decades now leisure scholars have explored the relationship between sociocultural factors and personal experiences through constructs such as definitions, role expectation, relationships, barriers and the conceptual division of work and leisure activities/experiences (e.g. Guignon & Aho, 2010; Henderson, 2000; Rojek, 1995; Shaw, 1994; Veal, 2004; Voss, 1967). Others in this field have turned to the internal realm and focused on the benefits of 'leisure-like' experience, discussing the importance of internal experiential traits such as self-determination, adjustable challenge, autonomy, personal meaning and intrinsic motivation (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003; Haworth, 2004; Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Martin, 2010; Neulinger, 1981; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Warr, 1987). And outside of the field of leisure studies, psychology scholars have looked at the inclusion of some 'leisure-like' traits in school programs citing the benefits students experience through such outcomes as increased engagement, internal locus of control and 'deeper' learning (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Kristjánsson, 2013; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2009; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). What I have found missing in these studies, however, is a link between these areas of research, overlapping the internal personal experiences with the sociocultural discussion of school as an institution in our society; I would like to offer this project as a small step in this direction as I look at my personal experiences and what they have to say about their sociocultural context. I believe that taking the 'fruit' of leisure scholarship, our

understanding of different kinds of experiences, the outcomes of different kinds of experiences, and how sociocultural perceptions shape and influence these experiences, and applying this body of knowledge to primary learning settings will potentially offer a new perspective on how we experience, engage with and conceptualize learning.

Broadly speaking I began this study looking at the entirety of an experience as a subjective and fluid expression as well as the presence and/or absence of a variety of experiential factors or traits prominent in the leisure literature such as: freedom of choice, personal satisfaction/meaning, autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and creativity. By looking beyond the traditional definitions of leisure activities and applying leisure theory to other experiences, breaking down the barriers of objective classification to look at matters of motivation, choice, empowerment, and structure in different settings, I hope to engage you, my reader, in an exploration of human experience. And by exploring these features of experiences in learning settings, conversely, I also hope to explore our understanding of learning settings and learning itself within its sociocultural context.

It is my intention that this paper, this work, appeals to a broad range of readers. While it is a project undertaken as a degree requirement, I believe that the content and findings are relevant to members of the public outside the academy and am writing with the hope that it find an audience spanning these two fields, holding up to academic scrutiny while remaining accessible and interesting to those more interested in the application and use of this material in practice.

With this goal in mind I would like to encourage you, whomever you are, to engage with this paper as best suits your needs. If you are here looking for a first-hand account of unstructured homeschooling, please feel free to skip ahead to that section. If, on the other hand,

you are like myself, a grad student looking for examples of ‘less than traditional’ methodological approaches, you’ll probably want to skip the literature review and head straight to my methods section. I’ve arranged the chapters in this paper such that they make sense to me and, to the best of my knowledge, meet the needs of my first audience, my committee and colleagues at the university, but as an interpretivist writer who sees your experience reading this paper as a crucial component of your understanding of the material, I do hope that you will actively consider your reading process in the shaping of that understanding.

While many different approaches could be used to explore this subject, my own unique perspective that combines my experiences in childhood with my current understanding of the academic literature surrounding this subject matter offers a distinct set of material for this study. Personal experiences offer a wide range of material to be unpacked and examined and, in this case, not only is my childhood/adolescence relatively unique but my work in this area throughout my adult life has placed me at a unique position from which I can look back and explore those experiences. Being able to offer you, my reader, a rich, detailed and embodied description of my experiences as well as being able to apply my academic/researcher perspective regarding the relating areas of literature through autoethnographic methods (Ellis, 2009; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010), not to mention my capacity to also explore long-term impacts of these experiences, this project stands to add a distinct voice to the discussion regarding education reform.

Describing this kind of work, Adams, Ellis and Bochner (2010) argue that autoethnographic personal narratives offer a unique approach to research that allows the researcher and, through reflection in response to the work, her readers to make sense of their own life stories by both exploring experiences using ethnographic practices and bearing witness to the

lived experience of the episodes being examined. Challenging conventional research beliefs regarding generalization and segmentation of knowledge from experiences, Ellis and Bochner (2006) describe the goal of this type of autoethnography as, "...to open up conversations about how people live, rather than close down with a definitive description and analytic statements about the world as it 'truly' exists outside the contingencies of language and culture" (p. 435).

For this project, wanting to understand how it felt to live in those different experiences and how matters of structure played out within them, the richness and engaged nature of autoethnography seems like a natural fit as,

...[i]nstead of being obsessively focused on questions of how we know, which inevitably leads to a preference for analysis and generalization, autoethnography centers attention on how we should live and brings us into lived experiences in a feeling and embodied way (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 438).

The nature of autoethnography will allow me to engage with my own experience in a dialectic manner, challenging how I think and write about my own life and thereby unpacking and exploring different facets of my experience to get at the deeper details, the unsaid reactions and the personal meanings, in a manner unlike that of more 'conventional' qualitative methods (Ellis, 2009). The other side of that process, meanwhile, allows me to look out from the personal insights and locate the experiences, and my new understanding of them, within the cultural context within which they occurred. The 'looking in and looking out' process in autoethnographic work asks not only 'what happened' but also 'what does that mean' pushing the researcher to discuss the significance and meaning of experiences relating them to broader topics, themes and understandings (Wall, 2006). For this work, I am looking forward to exploring my experiences in both learning settings and gaining insight into how they may, or may not, reflect or reject sociocultural understandings and perspectives regarding learning, school and education.

While this type of exploration can occur in other types of research, using autoethnographic techniques I will be processing and reflecting on my own stories and will be able to do so with the primary ‘participant’ in a much more direct and personal manner, understanding the connections and relations in a much more intimate way and thereby offering a different type of insight into the experiences lying at the heart of this study (Ellis, 2009). Using my own experiences, therefore, it is my hope that the autoethnographic gaze, looking back and forth from personal experience to the cultural context within which it occurred (Ellis, 2004), will offer my readers both rich description of the experiences themselves (e.g. Ellis & Bochner, 2006) as well as distinct insight into the broader cultural issues at play in this discussion (e.g. Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004).

Embracing the subjective, fluid and partial nature of autoethnographic research (Ellis et al., 2010; Wall, 2006), the purpose of this study is twofold: first of all, to explore and share my experiences of primary learning settings with my readers and illuminate the rich emotional lived experiences of these settings via expressive, evocative autoethnographic writing; and, secondly, to use my experiences as a foundation for a critical discussion of these types of lived experiences in structured and unstructured primary learning settings, examining both dominant cultural beliefs and my own assumptions through a lens of leisure studies theory. By comparing and contrasting my experiences in these settings I will explore not only the presence of different experiential traits in different experiences, but also how these different types of experiences in different settings can be used as a dialectic tool to engage and explore the cultural discourses surrounding learning and the settings within which it occurs.

The nature of this kind of autoethnographic work is such that the work evolves and develops as it goes (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005), which made it difficult to say from the outset

where it would take me in terms of specific themes and substantive content, the whole point being to explore the narratives and see what they illuminate. For the sake of clarity and giving some direction to my work, however, I started off this project using the following questions as focal points to orient both myself and my readers on this journey and found them helpful throughout the process whenever I found myself lost or unsure of where to step next.

*Guiding research questions:*

1) Looking at a personal and emotional level, what was the experience of externally-driven and internally-driven traits in both structured and unstructured learning environments? How did it feel to move from one type of experience to the other? Was there overlap of the types of experiences in the two different periods of my life? When did these overlaps occur and was my experience of them different in the different settings? How did the traits and different experiences in each setting impact how I felt, related to, and experienced learning and school?

2) What insight does my analysis of my experiences offer with regard to our cultural discourse surrounding learning, education and structure? How does the comparison of my experiences in the two different settings relate to other literature on these topics? Do my experiences reflect, reject and/or redirect cultural understandings and assumptions regarding these topics?

The first question is largely answered, I hope, by the autoethnographic narrative snapshots. It is my hope that in reading these vignettes you will not only share in my experiences vicariously but also be called back to your own learning experiences, reflecting on them and how they might compare and/or contrast with my experiences and the content of the rest of this paper exploring them. The second question is addressed in the last three chapters combined as I explore

and reflect upon my experiences from the vantage point of my current understanding, framing them theoretically, and discussing the broader cultural context of this work as a whole. In particular, in my discussion chapter I will explore the common threads that surfaced in my experience of writing about and reflecting on the narratives, highlighting the reoccurring elements that relate my experiences in the learning settings to my perspective on the related literature in leisure and sociology of education.

Having thus laid out the general roadmap of this journey for you, my dear reader, I will forge ahead and move on to the substantive landscape that makes up the contextual framework of my understanding of the various fields related to this study. Once we share an understanding of the conceptual background I'm working with (chapter two) I will walk you through my methodological approach and just how this study unfolded (chapter three), giving you the how after explaining the what and why. Following those chapters explaining the context of the study, you will find my autoethnographic narrative exploring my experiences in the two different learning settings (chapter four) which is itself followed by my reflection upon and discussion of what I've learned from this process (chapter five). We'll wrap things up with a conclusion section (chapter six) in which I will further discuss the sociocultural significance of what I've learned as well as my vision for future research in this area.

As I mentioned above, I hope that in reading this paper you also reflect upon your own similar experiences and when/how they agree or disagree with my own. I regret that I cannot directly engage with you in a dialectic manner but hope that you will be able to use this paper as an foundation for your own dialogue, much as I am using this study, to interrogate both our widely accepted societal perspectives as well as your own thoughts and understanding regarding learning in different settings.

## **Scene: Now I lay me down to sleep<sup>1</sup>**

*I lie in bed, snuggled down under the heavy duvet, tucked in my own bubble of warmth as I nuzzle into the pillow and close my eyes. My thoughts wander briefly over the day and I am drifting towards sleep when they land on schoolwork.*

*Eff.*

*In an instant am I fully awake again and feel the burn of stress deep in my gut. It never completely goes away these days but at moments like this my active thoughts breathe life into its glimmering embers and it flares up again bright and hot and sharp. I don't notice how shallow my breaths become until I feel my shoulders creeping up to my ears and have to force them to relax again, suddenly aware of my physiological reaction to the thought of my dissertation.*

*FFFF.*

*I curse my brain for reminding me, and myself for not getting more work done today.*

*Recognizing a less-than helpful reaction, I try to derail that train of thought with a change of focus. Okay, so I didn't get enough done today. What stopped me, what can I do tomorrow? Ignoring my attempt to rationalize them away, my thoughts insist on whipping my anxiety higher as I reflect on today's date and the impending deadlines for my dissertation. My dissertation. EFFFFFFEFF.*

*Breathe.*

*I turn over and lie flat on my back, closing my eyes and stretching out my legs into the cool section of blankets at the bottom of the bed.*

*The dissertation. Even thinking of it in general terms forces a sharp spike in the panic now lodged resolutely somewhere between my ribs and my gut. It reaches up to tighten a hand around my throat. I swallow past it, forcing it back down.*

*Stop it.*

*I'm still working away at my paper, trying somehow to find a way to write creatively and evocatively and yet also make it work as a dissertation, as something that satisfies my final degree requirement. Why is this so damned hard?*

*That answer is easy when I stop to think about it: I don't have an effing clue what I'm doing.*

*And I know that's part of all this, that grad students do dissertations to learn how to do a study, that's kind of the whole point of grad school, isn't it? But with this stuff, with autoethnography and all this 'non-traditional' approach stuff I feel more lost, more adrift, than when I've worked on other types of research.*

*This line of thought is slowly calming me down and I try not to notice lest I draw my attention back to the anxiety fuel once again. My thoughts are no longer racing but I'm no closer to sleep as I allow myself to explore what's really at the root of my struggle.*

*Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm too tied up in what I've always done to be able to do this. That thought sneaks in when I'm not paying attention and a disappointed sadness settles in next to the burn of anxiety.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document you will find these sections labeled 'Scene:...' in which I will share with you a more creative expression exploring my experiences working through the process of this work. Building from Richardson's (1995) ideas of sharing our writing stories to help give further insight into our work as well as Ellis and Bochner's (Ellis, 2000; 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006) examples of reflecting on the work even as it's presented, I hope that these pieces will bring you closer to understanding my mindset and how this work came to be in its current form.



*I want this to be easy. I want to be the free-spirited intellectual who effortlessly embraces the experimental and challenging world of non-traditional research, weaving narratives and citations together in a breathtaking, heartbreaking, expression that resonates and engages everyone lucky enough to come across it.*

*But I'm not.*

*I'm an anxiety-ridden, neurotic, and highly self-critical bag of stress and worry who can't let go of what I know long enough to reach for what I really want.*

*I lie there in bed cursing and soothing myself in turn and gradually sleep begins to dissolve the edges of my thoughts.*

*I feel myself starting to drift off and I wander into a metaphor, finding myself standing alone in a wood. The canopy overhead rustles in a cool breeze as I look around the untouched forest surrounding me. The silent trees stretch off in all directions, browns and greens and greys melding into an organic panorama. Individual trunks reach up from their firm bed of roots towards the open blue sky above. It's just me out here and I both love it and am deeply frightened by it. I love the freedom and openness, the personal space I have to move and explore and do whatever else I want. I can shout as much as I like, or sing or dance naked under the full moon. Except that I can't. I can't just roam around out here doing whatever I want, I have somewhere to be, I have a destination waiting for me, a date with convocation and a desire to create something concrete out of my time out here.*

*The problem always has been, I realize, that I have no idea where I'm actually trying to go. And, on top of that, there is no path to help me figure that out. There are no roads here. There aren't even any signs or trail markers nailed to trees. This is what I want, I want to forge my own path, but I haven't the foggiest idea of how to do that when it really comes down to it.*

*Somehow, however, in this halfway place between waking and sleeping, that doesn't bother me as much as it did a minute ago. The beauty of the woods, the rich smell of earth and green, the feeling of the warmth of a tree under the rough bark beneath my hand, it's... fantastic. I don't want to leave, I know that there is much to see here, many new insights to be found, I just need to get my feet under me and get moving.*

*I'm still anxious, there is a darkness here, both a seductive draw to just play and roam, ignoring my destination, wherever it is, and the opposing appeal to call for help and airlift myself away back to a safer spot with nicely lined paths and previously paved trails, and both options are equally enticing and just as equally not what I want.*

*So I stand still, drifting off to sleep as I breathe in the soft rich scents, knowing that it's not time for me to move yet but that the day is drawing ever closer, that I'm slowly figuring out just what I want to do out here.*

## **Chapter 2 (*Literature Review*): Here's where the story started (a.k.a. the 'here' from which I got to 'there')**

With regard to this project I have read a great deal of material relating to my topic and feel that it is important that my readers understand the broader grounding of my perspective and where my thoughts were from the outset of this project with regard to my exploration and analysis, not to mention the gaps in the literature which I hope this work will help to fill. Without overwhelming you with detail and too much discussion of various topics at this point of the study, I hope to share the wide range of material upon which I built my approach to the autoethnographic analysis so that you can follow that path with me, tracing my thoughts as I walk you through the process. With this goal in mind I am presenting you with the following review of related material in the hopes of both orienting you to the existing literature, the relevance of this area of study, and my own perspective regarding the subject matter.

I'm going to start by offering you a sociocultural context for this work, looking at the social foundation for school, that of work, looking at how industrialization contributed to the social institutionalization of learning and school in its current form. My exploration of work lead me back to leisure, talking about leisure-like experiences in work settings and the benefits to be found by blurring the lines between types of experiences, not to mention the process of examining experiences themselves and considering states of mind rather than just categorized, time designations and activities. From there I will turn your attention to the literature discussing school as a social institution, the branch of sociology studying school within our broader sociocultural narrative, discussing its enduring features and role in our society. And then finally, after discussing traditional school programs we will then explore the other side of my

experiences as I share with you a brief overview of the research exploring homeschooling, looking at trends in research and the general lack of experiential exploration of this increasingly popular ‘alternative’ approach to education.

### ***Work, leisure, traits, experiences, benefits and states-of-mind***

Coming into this study, one area I was interested in was exploring the relationship between school and work in our society. A relationship characterized by roles and expectations (i.e. school teaches us skills needed for adult work) and universal school traits (i.e. school as a constrained, externally driven experience), I was curious to compare my less constrained homeschooling experiences with those in the traditional setting centering this relationship as a potential focal point or orienting intersection. Before jumping into my autoethnographic writing, therefore, I explored the academic foundation of the principles of work as a social institution and its relation to our leisure studies literature.

### **Work and leisure: traits, categories and human experience**

To start at the beginning, with modern industrialization came the need for ordered, standardized and measured time to maintain workplace order, efficiency and productivity (Applebaum, 1998; Foucault, 1977; Glennie & Thrift, 1996; Veal, 2004). This mechanized, decentralized mass production in factories required standardized and consistently obeyed scheduling of time telling workers when to start and when to stop based upon the somewhat abstract designation of time of day, rather than the completion of a task or the seasonal cycles, and thereby drew distinct lines between ‘work’ and non-work in our daily lives (Applebaum, 1998; Guignon & Aho, 2010; Parker, 1972; Veal, 2004). This separation of work from the rest of life was echoed in the development of public schooling which, for the first time, separated

'learning time' from the rest of life for the majority of children (e.g. Bowles & Gintis, 1976; 2002; Prentice, 1977). Not only mirroring the division of life experiences, wide-spread public education in structured programs worked to,

...prepare people for adult work rules, by socializing people to function well, and without complaint, in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation. Schools accomplish[ed] this by what we called the correspondence principle, namely, by structuring social interactions and individual rewards to replicate the environment of the workplace (Bowles & Gintis, 2002, p. 1).

As a social mirror, or perhaps shadow, school, therefore, represented a work-like sphere in children's lives functioning to both support and measure their development as well as foster specific skills needed for industrialized workers, drawing my attention, as a leisure and education scholar, to this intersection of function and role.

Many leisure scholars have expressed a calling for more integration and balance and a blending of the best traits of leisure with the necessary participation in work. Often building on the work of Warr (1987), who found that certain, predominantly leisure-like, traits (i.e. opportunity for control, opportunity for skill use/development, externally generated goals, variety, environmental clarity, availability of money, physical security, opportunity for interpersonal contact, and valued social position) contributed to mental health in all environments, several other authors have argued that in order to maximize our health, happiness, and productivity we should be altering our conceptions of work to include more leisure-like attributes. These authors specifically noted the benefits of freedom of choice (e.g. Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Martin, 2010; Zuzanek, 2004), personal satisfaction (e.g. Haworth, 2004; Martin, 2010; Warr, 1987), personal agency and autonomy (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stebbins, 2004), intrinsic motivation (e.g. Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004), creativity (e.g. Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003) and flow-like experiences involving the balance of skill and challenge among other factors

(e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003; Martin, 2010). Clearly, based upon this research, leisure-like traits could be argued to be beneficial components to human experience in all areas of life as well as workplace/school.

Applying his flow theory to education, Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues have discussed various implications for optimization of experiences in education (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, 2006; Kristjánsson, 2013; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Discussed widely in the leisure studies literature, this theory, simply put, posits that human beings experience an optimal state of arousal when activities have clearly defined goals, offer immediate feedback and strike a balance between personal skill and the level of challenge found in that activity (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005). While in this state of ‘flow’, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) maintains, we can experience a fluctuating combination of the following features: hyper focus of attention, full concentration, complete involvement/engagement, merging of action and awareness (‘going on autopilot’), a freedom from anxiety over the possibility of failure, lack of self-consciousness, a distortion of time (moments may crawl by while entire games or events are over before we realize it), and a general autotelic attraction to the activity (the activity is seen as its own reward). Applying this branch of positive psychological theory to education, several authors have discussed how schools can increase student engagement and satisfaction by creating flow-conducive settings including student-driven activities, group work, emotional support and variable, individual levels of challenge (e.g. Bassi, Steca, Delle Fave, & Caprara, 2006; Kristjánsson, 2013; Bassi & Delle Fave 2011; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). While these programs were found to increase student engagement and involvement in learning, I have not yet found any research that explored the actual lived experience of the students, which is where I see my work bridging the gap between the more psychologically focussed, limited variable,

outcome-oriented education work and the experiential exploration of leisure research which I will now expand up on.

### **Experience as subjective and fluid**

Another thread of the leisure studies literature that called to me in preparing for this work is that which explores the personal subjective, fluid, and multifaceted experience of leisure as well as their complex relationship(s) with their social context(s). Resisting the categorization of life experiences and specific activities, Neulinger approached his study of leisure from a ‘state of mind’ perspective, focusing on specific individual experiences and the relationship of external (i.e. payoffs or consequences) and internal (i.e. personal motivation) factors contributing to an individual’s perception of that experience (Neulinger, 1981). Expounding the idea that leisure experiences occur in a range of settings and fluctuate depending on many different individual variables, Neulinger proposed a kind of continuum in which individual experiences could be located but within which they might move at any time, depending on the perception of the individual(s) involved.

Within his typology describing different variations of experiences on a work-leisure-job continuum, Neulinger (1981) called for what he described as a ‘molar’ approach to studying leisure experiences. Contrasting ‘atomic’ or ‘molecular’ isolated-trait-focused psychological studies, Neulinger argued for examination of broader patterns of experience situated in individual lives rather than cutting single facets out of their lived contexts. Fighting the idea of a work/leisure (or non-leisure/leisure) dichotomy, Neulinger (1981) believed that,

Once we follow through... on the implications of a state of mind conception of leisure, we are forced to give up the work-leisure dichotomy. We then find ourselves suddenly confronting not just a

part of a person's day, a section of life, but all of it, the total sphere of human activities (p. 140).

This conceptualization of leisure as a kind of human experience, one part of the broader story of our lives, rather than an allotment of time or designated grouping of activities, was one of the facets of leisure studies that first captured my attention: exploring our perceptions of our experiences and how different factors can influence those perceptions, not to mention the experiences themselves. Countless other authors have engaged this perspective in their leisure studies, looking at how emotional investment, expectations, goals, settings, reflection and/or a host of other individualized factors can impact our experiences and the meaning they hold in our lives (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, Graef, & Gianinno, 2014; Mannell et al., 1988; Parr, Greenwood & Lashua, 2004; Patterson, Watson, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 1998; Porter, Iwasaki, & Shank, 2010; Stewart, 1998). Calling for individualized, contextualized research, Stewart (1998) argued that,

If the depiction of leisure is a lived experience with temporal and spatial qualities, then assessments need to be sensitive to evolving situational contexts and embedded experiences and meanings. To recognize that an individual's leisure experiences emerge from interactions with situational contexts, is to recognize a personal story. The stories are lived and re-told; both the living and the telling are relevant targets for research, yet neither has a strong tradition of appreciation within the leisure literature (p. 396).

This thread in our collective tapestry of study weaves directly through my intent with this paper. In both writing the autoethnographic snapshots themselves and reflecting upon them within a theoretical framework, I am seeking to expand my understanding of these specific experiences, the different traits and facets of the experiences, and the sociocultural context within which they occurred.

With these works in mind, I began this study with a critical eye, wanting to challenge the work-like traditional school structures but from a distinct perspective, asking what else we could

learn about school and learning if we stopped to look at learning in different settings through the lens of leisure studies with our attention tuned to the contextual and fluid lived experience particularly as it intersected with specific experiential traits.

### ***Speaking of education (sociologically, that is)***

Having thus explored the leisure experience literature, I will turn your attention to one of the two settings that will offer material for my autoethnographic study of my own experiences, that of school. Looking to the broader cultural context again, the sociology of education literature unpacks the institutional identity of school, and its role in our society. Through my discussion of a small slice of this literature I hope to share with you my understanding of both the origin and nature of school's structure and form, a key element of this project as I hope to look out from my own experiences to the sociocultural context within which they happened.

### **The story of isomorphic credentialism (a.k.a. why school is the way it is)**

In looking at this study, I wanted to share with you two reoccurring concepts found in the sociology of education literature that are used to explain the structure of modern schools and their role in society: isomorphism and credentialism. According to my reading of the literature, these two concepts underpin school's role in our society by maintaining certain traits in all schools, and thereby confirming their identity, and offering us a standard method by which we can determine individual capacity and capability which, in turn, cements the importance of school as a social institution. For this work I find these ideas particularly important as they help us understand how and why school remains in its current form in our society despite calls for reform dating back over a century (e.g. Dewey, 1902; Hall & Dennis, 1969; Neill, 1937).



The concept of credentialism appears to have been largely accepted as an explanation for the pervasive dominance of formal education in the modern era (e.g. Beattie, 2002; Bidwell, 2001; Brown, 2001; Nagy, 2000). This perspective locates the major social use of education in preparing, sorting and labelling students rather than fostering general experiences or abilities (Collins, 1979). In a credentialist society, emphasis is placed on completing school, not the actual learning process, as employers use educational credentials as a sorting tool upon which to base their hiring decisions even when the job in question does not require most of the subject-based competencies related to obtaining the credential itself (Guile, 2003). As such, in this modern social model, value is placed upon skills, abilities and temperamental traits that allow students to succeed within the structured formal education model, the same traits required for the modern work world: specialized skills, basic literacy, obedience, ability to follow instructions, and response to externally driven motivational factors (Brint, Contreras, & Matthews, 2001). It would appear, therefore, that the modern school program is indeed a logical companion to the modern work-world but what is not explained by credentialism alone is the general isomorphic structure of the school. If the final product, the credentials, are what is most important, why don't schools show more variety in how they process students towards that end goal?

Finding its roots in the industrial modern age, sociologists argue that the enduring isomorphic design of the modern school program is directly related to the intangible nature of the educational "product" (e.g. McEneaney & Meyer, 2000; Meyer, 1977; Meyer, 2001; Meyer & Rowan, 1978). While factories can track and measure inputs, outputs, and the quality of finished products to prove their efficiency, multiple intersecting environmental factors, not to mention different experiences within the classroom, make it almost impossible to prove how efficient schools are as every child's progress depends on an incredibly complex and essentially

incalculable intersection of those factors (e.g. Davies & Guppy, 2006; Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1994a; Nelson, 1981). To put it plainly, no matter how hard a teacher tries or how much support a school offers, some children don't succeed academically but, conversely, other children overcome incredible barriers to exceed expectations with very little help, making it impossible to accurately measure the effectiveness of the modern school system itself.

Here school systems found themselves in trouble. If they couldn't measure the learning that was going on, and therefore prove the effectiveness of their work, how could they claim any value in the credentials they bestow and thereby justify their existence as a social good? In order to maintain its legitimacy in an increasingly rational society that demanded some sort of quantifiable features to which it could attach value, formal education resorted to uniform program attributes that were more easily noted and measured such as grade-groupings, subject definition and separation, scheduled class time, and testing-based evaluation etc. that would signal an individual program's identity as a member of the social institution of 'school' (Davies & Quirke, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1978). The isomorphic school design discussed in the sociology of education literature describes the ongoing features and components of most modern schools that have endured across time and geography to maintain our image of 'school'. Noted by authors spanning over a century, indeed from the very inception of modern public schooling, these features include: age-segregated grade levels; specific standardized curriculum centring on testing and earning marks; discrete subject classifications; distinct lesson times for specific subjects; a lack of intrinsically motivated or self-directed activity; top-down somewhat oligarchical power and control; and systematic, usually somewhat chronologically ordered, progression through the program (Davies & Guppy, 2006; Dewey, 1902; McEneaney & Meyer, 2000; National research council, 2000; Stevens, Wineberg, Herrenkohl, & Bell, 2005).

This legitimating ability of isomorphic design allows schools to be recognized and standardized, offering a uniform experience of ‘school’ to all attending citizens, despite the potentially different individual learning and personal experiences, not to mention widely varying outcomes. It also means that credentials handed out by these isomorphic schools can be held in universal regard to indicate what kind of program the individual has completed and, therefore, the kind of job for which he or she has been deemed capable.

Institutional theorists note, however, that along with this legitimizing isomorphism also comes a necessary “decoupling” of the school from the societal template which grants individual schools and teachers freedom in some areas so that they can meet the needs of their particular students (Bidwell, 2001; Coburn, 2004). For example, a school board and/or governmental education ministry may dictate that certain math skills be taught in grade two but how exactly those skills are explained, taught and practiced is left open to the individual teacher’s discretion. While this freedom does allow for some flexibility and individualization with regard to the daily experience of school, isomorphic legitimacy still demands highly segmented and externally directed scheduling, grouping and testing. As Bidwell (2001) put it:

...the mechanisms that structure school are external. Although people inside these organizations make decisions that adapt school structure, the constraints to which school structures are adapted arise from the process of cultural change and social control that create and maintain institutional beliefs about what schools are like and about the meaning of categories for school attainment (p. 104).

With respect to this discussion, it would appear, therefore, that while not every school experience is exactly the same, we can still be sure that the daily school experience of children in ‘traditional’ or mainstream schools include a great deal of structured activity dictated by external factors without being able to choose based on intrinsic motivation or personal preference and enjoyment (e.g. Guile, 2003; McDonald & Hursh, 2006).

Moving forward, then, I will later explore just how this focus on credentials impacts student lived experiences by examining my own motivations, feelings and beliefs regarding my time in high school. I will also look at how the form of school programs (those isomorphic features that have remained constant over the passing decades) impacts these experiences and how my daily life was shaped or influenced by these sociologically linked features.

### **Experiences in school versus school experience**

After this reading of sociology of education literature I was left still wondering what the individuals thought and felt about their own education experiences. In all the papers I read on our education system, its processes and outcomes, at first I found very little research that focused on the actual lived experiences of students. Indeed, database searches using combinations of terms such as ‘lived experience’, ‘children’, ‘school’, ‘education’ turned up papers discussing how experiences of school impact learning outcomes but very little on actual research into children’s experiences themselves. This scarcity was noted in other papers I read (e.g. Evans, 2002; Westling, 2010) and I assumed it was just a large gap in the literature that had been mostly left unfilled, that is, until towards the end of writing my proposal I happened upon a handbook exploring just that stream of research (Thiessen, 2007). Citing a growing body of research this handbook discusses the explosion of experience-focused research that has occurred since the 1990’s, most of which was unmentioned by the other fields of education research I had been reading. Where this gap between the two bodies of literature comes from I have no idea but it is interesting to note that the vast majority of ‘education research’ pays very little attention to the actual experiences of students, a fact noted in the handbook itself (Thiessen, 2007). It is my hope

that this project offers a glimpse, albeit a small one, into student experience and offers you, my dear reader, an invitation to reflect upon your own experiences in contrast with the ones I share with you here.

In reviewing the research I found that does focus on the experiential side of education I agreed with Thiessen's introduction to the handbook, finding said research to fall predominantly into three different orientations:

(1) how students participate in and make sense of life in classrooms and schools; (2) who students are and how they develop in classrooms and schools; and (3) how students are actively involved in shaping their own learning opportunities and in the improvement of what happens in classrooms and schools (Thiessen, 2007, p. 8).

The research cited in this overview of the field includes a variety of methodological approaches but is dominated, almost exclusively with mid-sized to smaller qualitative work (e.g. Kaba, 2000) and ethnographic observational studies (e.g. Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998).

Thiessen (2007), in his introduction, traces the history of this branch of research starting largely in the middle of the twentieth century looking at student behaviour and attitudes and then moving on to a perspective that in the 1990's oriented the students as the 'protagonists' in their own education, negotiating and otherwise actively engaged with their teachers, peers, and school programs. Lately, according to Thiessen, this field of research has moved even further to focus on 'giving voice' to students, working to include them in decisions regarding their school experiences, teacher training and even the research itself as co-investigators (e.g. Cook-Sather, 2006; 2010; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009).

The research I found on exploring how student experiences impact learning outcomes predominantly centred on uncovering and labelling different facets of learning experiences such as relationships with teachers (Cothran & Ennis, 1997) or engagement with curriculum (e.g.

Davis, 2005; Evans, 2002) but very little of the material focused on sharing the experiences themselves; the researchers looked for how experiential factors (or perceptions of them) impacted learning and outcomes of school participation but didn't describe or investigate the lived experiences, in and of themselves, with any great depth of description. What I found when I read the studies talking about 'school experience' was that their use of the term 'experience' was quite different from what I'm talking about in this study as my purpose.

My goal is to explore the nature of different lived experiences, centring the experience itself at the core of the work, looking for detail and description to share that experience with you. These other studies, on the other hand, ask students about their experiences in order to get at their opinions; the experiences were often used as a kind of evidence to frame the opinions of the students or talk about their needs and desires without actually asking them directly. In short, exploring experiences, in this context, was largely about finding out other information such as the impact of high-stakes testing (Dutro & Selland, 2012) or the gap between technology used at home and at school (Stefl-Mabry, Radlick, & Doane, 2010), not about putting the researcher, or the reader, in the student's position to explore and empathize directly with their experiences.

One doctoral dissertation I found, however, attempted to use richer description to share the participants' experiences, splicing together quotes from interviews to create a short monologue from each child's perspective on in-school suspension (ISS) (Evans, 2011). Discussing her phenomenological approach, Evans (2011) did note that she was not actually claiming to be presenting the children's experiences but that each story:

...is the student's active sense-making, not 'an internal representation of his/her subjective experiences,'... I do not view the students' accounts of their experience with ISS as factual or definitive, but rather as a way that they made meaning of their experience within the context of the interview itself (van Manen, 1984; Thomas & Pollio, 2002) (p. 91).

While I accept Evan's explanation of her approach from a phenomenological perspective, and appreciate her full acknowledgement of the subjective interpretive nature of the work, I was still left uncertain of what to make of her monologues from an experiential perspective. Insightful, yes, interesting and thought-provoking, certainly, but looking at it from within the context of my current work, the lack of any kind of member check or deeper discussion of creating the monologues themselves, not to mention the absence of deeper emotional responses or description of more than superficial daily happens in ISS, left me wanting to know more about what it was 'really like'. This study, therefore, while offering a different perspective and very valid presentation of student experiences in (somewhat) their own words, still does not actually focus on sharing that experience on a deeper, personal, emotional level with the reader. To me, this paper epitomized my attraction to the more detailed embodied descriptions of creative analytic practice presentations of research (Richardson, 1999); the work was interesting and insightful but it felt like I was still missing a part of something, part of what I wanted to know about the topic. The desire for this type of detail certainly isn't something everyone looks for, especially in social science research, but it is what interests me, what I'm curious about, and what drives my desire to engage in this current work.

Substantively, what I also found largely missing from my readings in this body of literature was a discussion involving in any way different experiential traits as found in the leisure studies literature. Again, as with the broader sociology of education literature, the focus, even when discussing education reform, appears to be largely focused on improving our current system rather than opening the discussion up to the idea of radical reform or exploring alternatives that would offer a dramatically different type of learning setting. With this work, as I explore experiences in both structured and unstructured settings, I hope you, my readers, are

encouraged to reflect upon these types of experiences and unpack these dominant conceptions surrounding school, learning, and experience.

### ***What do you mean, you don't go to school?***

Moving from the institutional structures of school and its role in our society, I will now flip the coin over and show you the other side, that of homeschooling. My current work is not emphasizing homeschooling itself as a phenomenon, per se, but rather looking at my experiences of unstructured learning that happened to occur within a homeschooling setting. Because of this fact I've debated the inclusion of this section in my literature review.

My final decision rested in the fact that I'm assuming most of my readers are not personally familiar with homeschooling and that if I am to talk about our sociocultural contextualization of learning and school with a homeschooling experience as one part of that discussion, I should probably offer you some background in terms of research conducted and homeschooling's current existence in our society. In writing my autoethnographic snapshots I found that the 'otherness' of homeschooling resurfaced several times, my memories of different experiences including specific acknowledgement at the time about how my life differed from 'mainstream' childhood. Because of these incidences, I think it important that you know what the fields of research say about homeschooling outcomes, current trends and cultural acceptance, and research that may or may not explore the actual experience of these settings.

Offering you this brief overview of existing literature, and the gaps I found within that body, I hope to not only familiarize you with the broader image of homeschooling but also point to the relevance of this work within the field of related research. For the sake of your orientation and understanding my perspective, I will remind you that my homeschooling



experience was in an unstructured environment where my mother was the primary caregiver/instructor.

The number of studies exploring the phenomenon of homeschooling has increased dramatically over the course of the past decade (Basham, Merrifield, & Hepburn, 2007; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Murphy, 2012), reflecting the general growing acceptance of the practice as a valid alternative to mainstream traditional schooling (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Davies, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2003). While almost all researchers note the inherent difficulties with measuring a group that is, by and large, unregulated and ‘off the grid’ in terms of official documentation, every study discussing homeschooling demographics notes a growth over the past several decades (e.g. Basham et al., 2007; Jolly, Matthews, & Nester, 2013; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013) with recent Canadian numbers being estimated at between 60,000 and 80,000 children in 2003<sup>2</sup> (Van pelt, 2003). Historically speaking, looking at the period in which I was homeschooled, officially documented homeschooling rates went from 2,000 Canadian children in 1979 to over 17,000 by 1996, with homeschooling organizations citing much higher numbers (Basham et al, 2007). It is important to note here that North American laws dictating registration and/or regulation of homeschooling families differ from province to province and state to state (Basham et al., 2007) which not only makes it difficult for researchers to measure the size of this population accurately but also potentially impacts our understanding of the phenomena as those families who participate in research are usually identified through homeschooling organization or official records, excluding families who choose not to register with private organizations and/or governmental bodies, a potentially very distinct sub-set within this growing community.

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<sup>2</sup> More recent data from statistics Canada is unavailable and the 2011/2012 dataset does not contain specific statistics regarding homeschooling participation in Canada (personal communication, Agnes Zientarska-Kayko, Government Information and Liaison Librarian, Dana Porter Library, University of Waterloo, November 05, 2013).

With that unavoidable limitation noted, let's talk about what I mean when I use the term, 'homeschooling'.

Simply put, homeschooling has been officially defined as “when a child participates in his or her education at home rather than attending a public, private, or other type of school” (as cited in Basham, Merrifield, & Hepburn, 2007, p. 6) and as “the education of school-aged children at home rather than at a school” by the government of the United States (as cited in Basham et al., 2007, p. 7). Murphy (2012) discusses different definitions of homeschooling that speak to parental motivations, level of involvement with traditional schooling or other educational institutions and resources, and “both voluntariness and a rejection of conventional schooling” (p. 5) which excludes families homeschooling because of medical reasons or lack of available schools in remote areas. For the purposes of this paper I will be using the more broadly focused definitions cited by Basham et al (2007) as they are more inclusive and in agreement with my own definition of what is the primary difference between homeschooling and traditional schooling experiences: spending the majority of ‘learning time’ at home and not in another setting. From my perspective, motivation for choosing to homeschool does not change the fact that the child is at home and not at school.

Research exploring homeschooling appears to largely focus on either measurable outcomes (e.g. Collom, 2005; Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011; Princiotta & Bielick, 2006) or parental motivations and experiences (e.g. Collom, 2005; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Horsburgh, 2005; Rathmell, 2012), for the most part ignoring the experiences of individual ‘students’. Recently, Canadian researchers Aurini and Davies have examined homeschooling in a sociocultural context discussing its increased legitimacy in the eyes of the general public and its subsequent increased popularity amongst parents looking for an alternative to the public system

(Aurini & Davies, 2005; Davies, 1999; Davies & Aurini, 2003), locating it within the scope of what mainstream families today might consider when faced with a desire for more individualized instruction and a sense that the public system is no longer able to adequately address their children's needs.

In particular import to this work, seeing as my homeschooling experience ran roughly from 1983-1993, in the 1980's and 90's almost all of the homeschooling research focused on measurable outcomes of homeschooling and whether or not homeschooled children were performing at lower academic levels or struggling with socialization more than their peers enrolled in public school (e.g. Knowles & de Olivares, 1991; Moore, 1986; Smedley, 1992; Taylor & Petrie, 2000 as cited in Basham, 2007). The weight of this evidence, as found in my own reading and several in meta-analyses published by other scholars (Basham et al., 2007; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Medlin, 2000), indicates that while there are still questions to be asked, it would appear to be generally accepted that homeschooled children do at least as well as their age peers with regard to academic achievement and social development.

In order to give you a broader understanding of the world of homeschooling and its existence in our sociocultural framework, I want to briefly now share with you some of the research (dated and current) that explores homeschooling in order to share some of the other issues that have been debated and discussed by and about homeschoolers for decades.

The body of literature exploring parental motivation to homeschool has traditionally, based on Van Galen's (1987) work, centred on a division between families who homeschool because of ideological motivations and those motivated by pedagogical objections to traditional formal education programs. This typology has been widely touted as the seminal foundation of much of the research involving homeschooling and parents' motivations (e.g. Arai, 2000;

Basham et al., 2007; Collom, 2005; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Lubienski, 2000; Nemer, 2002). These types of motivations have been noted to be in decline in more recent literature (Davies & Aurini, 2003) but are still heavily discussed. Other areas of motivation including family relationships (Arai, 2000) and parental rights (Davies & Aurini, 2003) have also been introduced but have not taken such a prominent place in the literature as the typology of ideologues and pedagogues first posited by Van Galen (1987).

Subsequent research following the ideological vein has explored parental desires to: protect their children from specific religious or moral objections to the content of curricula (Basham et al., 2007; Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2002; Collom, 2005; N. Green, 2007; Mayberry, 1988; Nemer, 2002; Princiotta & Bielick, 2006); impart specific values or knowledge to their children (Bielick et al., 2002; Collom, 2005; Lubienski, 2000; Mayberry, 1988; Princiotta & Bielick, 2006); follow an alternative lifestyle not supported within the public school system (Arai, 2000; Collom, 2005; Mayberry, 1988); and invoke the parental right and/or responsibility to educate their children themselves (Arai, 2000; Davies & Aurini, 2003; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Lubienski, 2000; Mayberry, 1988; Nemer, 2002). In the American research, neo-liberal values centering on reducing the influence and degree of control of the state within their lives were also noted in ideologically motivated parents (Lubienski, 2000; Ray, 2000). Canadian parents, however, were distinctly noted not to have identified motivations linked to neo-liberal political views (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2003).

Similar to my mother's motivations, other studies of homeschooling motivations have, in turn, found that parents choose to homeschool for pedagogical reasons because they want to: create an individualized educational program to meet their child's specific needs (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Bielick et al., 2002; Davies & Aurini, 2003; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007);

foster an egalitarian learning environment without hierarchical power structures (Arai, 2000); and offer their children a better education than they would receive in a public school (Bielick et al., 2002; Lubienski, 2000; Princiotta & Bielick, 2006). My mother's approach to our education stemmed from a belief in self-directed learning and the power of curiosity in motivating and directing children's growth and development as espoused by authors such as Neill (Neill, 1962; 1970) and Holt (Holt, 1967; 1970; 1981), both of whom she read and recommended to friends interested in exploring homeschooling.

With regard to this pedagogical perspective, it is interesting to note that my mother's perspective closely aligned with the recommendations of the Hall-Dennis report produced in 1969 by a committee appointed by the Ontario government (Hall & Dennis, 1969). In this report, which is widely cited as having been largely ignored despite its initial assignment to offer a basis of reform for Ontario's education system in preparation of the end of the twentieth century, the authors advocated for radical change to the entire primary-secondary education system turning to what they called student-orient education which included: self-directed, flexible programs evaluated in a qualitative manner, abandoning traditional grade and subject segmentation as well as traditional pass/fail marking systems and old models of top-down teacher oriented curriculum, amongst other features. It was from this report, entitled *Living and Learning*, that my mom actually drew the name for the private school she formed at the request of the local school board after she objected to the formal testing and evaluation homeschoolers were then required to complete (L. Chapeskie, personal communication, April 21, 2015; Johnson, 1981). According to my mom, after having a counsellor visit us and talk to us kids, informally assessing our development and 'program' (or lack thereof), the school board was quite happy to have us exist as a small private school, which was then exempt from provincial

testing under the current law, rather than fight over the matter with my mom who felt such testing was pointless given our ‘unschooled’ approach and lack of any kind of curricula or expected task completion. It is interesting to me, in reflection with this work, to read this report and see how so much of the ‘radical’ material being espoused by authors like Hold and Neill were agreed with by this collection of educators and other professionals selected by the government to make recommendations for reform. The obvious lack of these changes existing in education in Ontario today is perhaps an interesting testament to our commitment to the traditional forms of school and/or the difficulty we face when trying to change such ingrained institutions.

Going back to the literature, some of the most recent research has found that many homeschooling parents are citing other reasons as their primary motivations. Aurini and Davies’ (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2003) found that some Canadian parents are moving away from the more extreme politicized issues of “unschooling” or religious principles to more mainstream ideals of choice and parental rights and responsibilities, motivations that are similar to but specifically noted as differing from Van Galen’s original ideologues in that their motivations were consistent with general societal trends, not countering them. While these studies specifically noted a lack of neo-liberal values in the participants, as I have mentioned above, they found that these parents were aligning themselves with a generally liberal shift in Canadian society emphasizing individual rights and freedoms rather than “expressing alienation from the dominant political and cultural streams” (Davies & Aurini, 2003, p. 63) as their predecessors did in the 1960’s and 1970’s. This general shift in mentality that parents are now choosing to homeschool based on a more ‘mainstream’ motivation to assert their parental rights or to take responsibility for their children’s education was also noted by several other recent

studies (Arai, 2000; Bielick et al., 2002; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Lubienski, 2000; Nemer, 2002; Princiotta & Bielick, 2006). Against this new information, some of my experiences stand in contrast; as homeschooling has become more widely accepted and popular, the ‘otherness’ I experienced as a child has perhaps diminished for today’s homeschoolers (but based on anecdotal responses from folks whom I talk to about my research it still remains a largely misunderstood and ‘outsider’ experience in our society) but the differences between my experiences being ‘unschooled’ and then transitioning into the public school remain salient as school programs have remained relatively similar as discussed above.

Looking at the ‘dark side’ of homeschooling, Reich (2002) and Apple (2013) both discuss the negative social implications for privatized and restricted educational experiences. Discussing insulated families and restricted exposure to different perspectives and outsiders, these two authors argue that public education offers a generalized public good of ensuring that children learn certain material and are allowed to encounter different perspectives, ideologies and beliefs outside those of their families and/or individual smaller communities such as church groups (Apple, 2013; Reich, 2002). Several European countries agree with these types of concerns and have banned homeschooling all together, with Germany even going so far as to charge parents and apprehend children from homeschooling families in order to enforce mandatory attendance laws (“German home-schooled children taken into care,” 2013; Spiegler, 2003).

It is interesting to think about these concerns within the context described by Davies and Aurini (2004; 2005; 2003) in their discussion of current trends and the increased ‘mainstreaming’ of the idea of homeschooling in Canada. If more and more parents are seeing home schooling as a better option for their children’s education on the grounds of different types of programs, individualized instruction, and pedagogical difference, but at the same time large-scale

homeschooling could potentially represent a problem for the greater good of our whole society, perhaps this is an indication that more substantial reform is needed in our approach to public education in order to address the parents' desire for different learning settings but still having the children attend some form of external schooling program.

When looking at the more specific focus of my current study within the context of the homeschooling literature I found very little research focusing on the children's lived experience of homeschooling, which I found particularly interesting given that much of the research indicates that individualized experiences and needs rests at the heart of most parents' motivations to homeschool. At this point I want to acknowledge that this project is also not actually asking children about their experiences but is attempting to explore childhood experiences which, I believe, will offer a particular insight into the phenomena of homeschooling, especially as I am in a position to reflect on those experiences within the broader context of both the longer-term outcomes in my life and my own knowledge relating to these matters.

In the three large-scale meta-analyses that I found there was essentially no discussion of the children's experiences, their desires or reactions to being homeschooled (Basham et al., 2007; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Murphy, 2012). When discussing broader scale studies, and creating a more generalized overview of the research, I can understand not focusing on case-studies or smaller scale studies individually but I found that it very interesting that this type of research was not mentioned to exist, nor, perhaps more importantly, noted to be absent in these discussions of what we know about homeschooling and how we have come to know it. While in American government surveys (Bielick et al., 2002; Princiotta & Bielick, 2006) a small number of parents did mention their child's preference as a motivator in their homeschooling decision, I found the general lack of attention paid to the child's experience or wishes striking.



In my review of the literature, however, I was able to find a small number of studies examining the lived experience of homeschoolers. As you will see below, however, these studies also largely focused on the parents' experiences and reflections, rather than their children's. Green's (2007) exploration of families using Alberta's virtual school program to homeschool included observation of the actual homeschooling process in three different families (focusing primarily on the parents' experiences) while Mills (2009) explored South African children's experience of homeschooling in middle childhood. Using a small scale qualitative interview-based approach focused around three key themes of individualized learning (e.g. being able to work at an individualized pace with more direct support and personalized programs), family relationships (e.g. stronger bond with primary caregiver, increased sense of identity and self-confidence) and social dynamics (e.g. Missing 'school friends' but enjoying having friends in different age groups from different settings) Mills offers insight into the broader life experiences but includes no evocative or emotional/personal detail on the lived experiences themselves. Van Pelt (2009) asked 226 adults who had been homeschooled as children to reflect upon their experience(s) and report on their current life situations, measuring outcomes of homeschooling participation. Of particular interest to me was the fact that these respondents ranged in age from 15-35 at the time of the study, placing their experiences of homeschooling in roughly the same era as my own, contextualized within the same broader sociocultural framework. Largely focusing on demographic patterns such as marriage rates, and formal education credentials obtained, this survey did include a small number of items that relate to the experience of homeschooling. The first item asked respondents to,

...reflect on their home education experience by selecting among four statements the ones with which they agreed. The most commonly checked statement was 'I am glad that I was home educated', with which 187 (84%) of the respondents agreed. Close

to half of all the respondents (48%) checked two statements, indicating that they were not only glad they were home educated but that they also believed that 'Having been home educated is an advantage to me as an adult.' Altogether, 141 respondents (63%) checked the latter statement (Van pelt et al., 2009 pg. 36).

The instrument also included two open ended questions asking respondents about the 'best and worst parts' of being homeschooled. Analysis of the 'best parts' revealed that the participants identified common responses relating to: "rich relational aspects, the opportunity for extensive curricular enrichment, the flexibility especially in terms of the schedule, the individualized pace and programs, the development of their own independence and confidence, and the superior education received" (Van pelt et al., 2009 pg. 37). Regarding the 'worst parts', Van Pelt found that,

while in no case did the majority of respondents agree on any specific challenge, in order of most commonly noted, the worst part of being home educated included the social challenges [e.g. wanted more time with peers or felt isolated], curricular limitations [e.g. lack of special classes/equipment and extracurricular activities], societal prejudice [e.g. stereotypes, felt judged, limited access to higher education], later adaptation to classroom settings [e.g. struggles with due dates, working in groups, scheduling], and possible strains on family [e.g. too much sibling contact, controlling parents] (p. 37).

In the context of this current study, the perspective of these formerly-homeschooled adults offers some interesting areas to consider such as social connectedness and adapting to structured programs once in more formal education settings.

Where my research will fall within this broader scope of the literature, therefore, is to help share not only a deeper understanding of the experience of homeschooling but to also compare and contrast that experience with more formal education within the same individual's life. I think the reflexive perspective offered by autoethnography, as well as my familiarity with related literature, as discussed in this chapter, will add to this exploration as I will be uniquely

able to both discuss my different learning experiences and relate them to the academic literature in related fields. By relating my experiences to the leisure literature, in exploring the impact and role of different experiential traits, I will be branching out from the existing literature and opening a new thread of discussion regarding how we talk about, experience and foster learning in different types of settings.

### ***Now that we have our map...***

And there you have it, the topical overview of my world of understanding as it stood at the outset of this project. Having thus presented you with the relief map orienting the different areas in relation to each other and pointing out the major structures and shapes, I can't wait to zoom in, through the process of my autoethnographic analysis, and wander with you through the details, exploring the hills and valleys of these theories and approaches, following others' paths and striking our own as we wander though and add our own perspectives to this colourful and varied landscape.

I hope that after reading all that you feel well oriented and familiar with who I am as a scholar and where I am coming from in this study in particular. Overlaying my understanding of these different fields of literature on top of each other I stand at their intersection point(s), pulling from a variety of sources and disciplines as I move forward with this project in order to help frame, contextualize and illuminate my experience within the broader cultural picture. And how exactly will that work, you ask? What will it look like, how will you be bringing this all together to explore your own experiences?

I'm so very glad you asked.

## **Scene: Coffeeshop writer**

*I sit snuggled into a corner table in the crowded coffee shop. Families are tramping in and out, the older regulars wait resolutely for their usual order to accompany the daily papers tucked under their arms, and here and there are scattered others like me, hunched over laptops and notebooks, doing their best to block out the bustle. I sip gingerly from the hot mug of tea while I read through my slides for my presentation.*

*Halfway through the presentation I become aware of a heavy sadness, disappointment and regret seeping into my gut. This is not the presentation I want to give. This is a collection of other people's thoughts, carefully cited and APA'd in their neat little bullet-pointed lists, not the living and breathing, evocative creative expression I want it to be.*

*By the time I realize this, my chest is constricted and the fiery fist of tension is twisting itself between my shoulder blades once again. I almost laugh when I think of how I've felt all of these things for the past few weeks but managed to ignore them and blunder on writing and building these slides, blindly falling into old habits and comfortable patterns. Why do I always do that? I love creative writing and have read enough to be able to articulate why it works as research and yet I always end up back here.*

*Surprised to be so upset over this revelation I shut my laptop and reach for my trusty black Moleskine, this kind of reflection calls for pen and ink.*

*It takes only a moment before my hand moves across the page and I'm spilling out my thoughts on its comfortingly familiar cream surface. The relief of just writing ripples through me as I babble on about my instincts and how I return to traditional academic writing time and time again, no matter how hard I try to break down those habits in my own work. The cafe*

*disappears, my bad leg and its constant ache fade from notice and I'm in that lovely space where the words just appear on the page on their own, the hand scribbling them down like the swinging arm on a polygraph machine, capturing and displaying my thoughts before I'm even really aware I've had them.*

*After a moment I realize I am smiling. I'm smiling because even as I write about my frustration I am breaking the habit. This time I noticed it. This time, I caught myself and am more aware of where I've mis-stepped than ever before. This time, I returned to what I love, what feels right to me, and am finding my way through it.*

*The irony of the fact that this presentation has turned out to be a perfect little microcosm of my issues with The Dissertation has not eluded me and as I write I can feel all the old anxieties and pressures building in my chest again.*

*What am I trying to say with this presentation? What's the point of it? I want to do something more creative but how can I do this? How can I create something unique and personal and evocative and meaningful when I'm so scared of going too far, when I fear failing too much to let go and take a chance?*

*As soon as those words are out on the page I sit back and stare at them. That's what's really going on here. To commit to something 'out there' and non-traditional means taking the chance that it will fail. And therein lies the crux of my struggle: finding the balance between my deeply entrenched understanding of how to do 'academic' work, and my desire to write creatively.*

*The voices in my head are arguing again. And I'm back out in the woods again with no path and no sense of where I'm trying to go. How do I decide what to include or exclude? How creative can I get without losing everyone and becoming one of 'those' researchers, undermining*

*what I have to say with inaccessible writing that doesn't resonate with anyone but myself? How do I, ever the rule-fearing rebel, break free and find a blended path between the two halves of myself that have always stood so diametrically opposed to each other?*

*Thinking about letting go of my safety blanket of citations and analysis frightens me more than I want to admit, even in my scrawling mess on the silent non-judgemental page.*

*But if I don't try I'll never know. And I've sat in enough coffeeshops writing the same old stuff with that same constriction around my chest to know that it's not what I want.*

*Come what may, I want to try.*

### **Chapter 3 (*Methods*): A method to the madness**

Approaching this project, like any researcher taking on a new area of work, I wrestled with many questions about where I wanted to take it. What exactly was I going to explore about this topic area? What specific questions did I want to ask? And, subsequently, how could I best work towards answers to those questions or begin to explore the area surrounding them?

The desire to study the deeper lived experience of different learning settings and look at the manifestation of different kinds of experiences in their complex, intersecting and overlapping presence, made autoethnography an ideal possible methodology for this study. The capacity of autoethnography to include rich, embodied personal description as well as broader cultural contexts and insight has been widely discussed (e.g. Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010; Holman Jones, 2005; Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010; Wall, 2006), also making it a potential match for this project in terms of the type of research outcomes for which I am looking. Much of the literature discussing autoethnography as a methodological approach emphasizes the methodology's postmodern roots in embracing plural realities, multiple perspectives and the impossibility of the traditional positivist separation of researcher from their research (Ellis et al., 2010; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Spry, 2001). Building from this epistemological perspective, when I think about conducting research in this area, I know that my own passion and perspective plays a large part in my work and, as such, autoethnography seems like an ideal place to start my work as it will afford me the opportunity to explore how my perspective and personal experience relates to the broader cultural context and related academic literature.

And that is all well and good, you might find yourself saying, but what exactly do you mean by autoethnography? What is it about this method that makes it such a good match, beyond

just your own experiences coinciding with your research interest and a general perspective on epistemological matters? In the words of Carolyn Ellis,

Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness... they look through the ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing on outward social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37).

As will no doubt become apparent as you continue to read further into this section of my paper, across all my readings of autoethnographic literature Ellis’ work has resonated with me both personally and academically and, as such, I will be drawing heavily from her writing on the methodology as I work through this section and the rest of the project. Following this model I will gaze inward and outward using my experience as a focal point as I explore the story of my lived experience of school, learning and education.

While autoethnographic approaches have become more widespread in the past few years, ranging in style of approach (e.g. Calley Jones, 2010; Fournillier, 2011; Kaufmann, 2011) and topic area (e.g. disability Berger & Feucht, 2011; Bochner, 2012; organizations Boyle & Parry, 2007; social work Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010; family relationships Sparkes, 2012), the pioneering scholars who first embraced these methods did so as a way to: include their own voices in their research, as opposed to the traditionally distant omnipotent but disembodied author’s voice; tell the story of the research process and reflect upon how it shapes the outcomes of the work; and to bridge the gap traditionally drawn between the personal and the political, the researcher and the research, the individual experience and its cultural significance (Bochner, 2002; Denzin, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Holman Jones, 2000). The stories told in autoethnographic work blend together personal, embodied, and emotional storytelling with



analysis and reflection linking them to the political, cultural, historical and academic context within which they occurred (Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnography, known by many different names in different forms (i.e. personal narratives, performance ethnography, evocative ethnography, narratives of the self), developed in the early 1990's out of the seventh moment of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002), embracing the postmodernist understanding that, "the researcher is not an objective, neutral observer... [and] is always historically situated, never able to give more than a partial rendering of any situation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002 pg. xi). As a researcher who sees herself as situated and involved, I am drawn to the idea of these, "messy, experimental and multi-layered texts, cultural criticism, new approaches to the research text, new understandings of old analytic methods, and evolving research strategies" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002 p. Xi) that challenge traditional, static, distant and detached methods. The embracing of subjectivity that drew (and still draws) criticism from more traditional fronts is exactly what appeals many authors, including myself, as it allows for more blended presentations and more subjective response from readers as they interpret the work for themselves (e.g. Denzin, 2003; Ellis, 2004; 2009; Fournillier, 2011; Holman Jones, 2005; Richardson, 1999). This subjective and open-ended nature of autoethnography was no accident; seeking to create a methodological practice that, "was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433), the pioneers in this field wanted a dynamic approach that would engage our culture and society actively, setting it in motion, in contrast to more traditional methods that separate the organic, vital, ever-changing culture from how it is lived and freeze-frame it in static analysis and distanced discussion.

With specific regard to this work, I hope that my narratives and subsequent reflections will invoke in my readers a reflexive response leading them to think about experiences in their own educational history (Spry, 2001). Revising experiences and thinking about how and when we enjoyed ourselves or felt more engaged with our own learning, or when we didn't, I hope will encourage deeper understanding of our own lives, experiences, and thoughts about learning settings. Looking at the experiences of different kinds of experiences I hope will also add to a general conversation of human experience and our values regarding how we see and frame our experiences within a cultural framework, moving the work from looking in to looking out at the broader sociocultural context of my experiences.

Building from narrative traditions that explore lived experience as it is storied by the individual (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1988), autoethnographic research thus centres the researcher as the phenomenon being studied and strives to write evocative, reflexive stories to share their lived experiences with their readers. Centring myself in the autoethnography means that for this project I will be "...both the author and the focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed, the creator and the created. I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller" (Ellis, 2009 pg.13). Expanding this conception of autoethnographic research, I am drawn to the need for personal vulnerability and evocative exploration of the lived experience being studied.

It is not enough to simply use 'I' in the writing and talk about something that happened to you one time, evocative autoethnography demands that the writer push herself to include personal details, confront her own thoughts and interpretations of the experience and find a way to share the complex myriad of emotions, expressions, impressions and sensations with the

reader (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). For this project, this is where autoethnography hit home for me, in the desire to explore the emotional and personal side of these life shaping experiences and engage my readers in a reflection of what it was like to actually be there in both settings.

In this paper, therefore, I will be using the term “autoethnography” to describe the evocative, emotional, expressive form of self-story writing supported, discussed and conducted by authors such as Denzin (2003), Holman-Jones (2005), and Ellis (2000; 2009), amongst others. And in embracing this evocative, expressive, form of autoethnography, for this work I have chosen to share my autoethnography with you in the form of narrative creative writing, adopting creative analytic practice (CAP). Wanting to address some of my first research question by exploring and sharing my experiences at the immediate emotional level, this type of writing has allowed me to express what I’ve found in this work “through evocative and creative writing techniques including artistic and literary genres ” (Parry & Johnson, 2007, p. 121). Writing in a personal, embodied and evocative form has allowed me to explore the complexity of lived experience, contextualizing the material and acknowledging the subjective, plural and interpretive nature of my work while rejecting the generalizing, absolute authority of traditional presentations (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Richardson, 2000).

As I mentioned above, by sharing my personal experiences, and reflecting upon them as they relate to broader academic fields of literature, I hope to not only present a different side of the societal story regarding our experiences of learning and education but also to encourage readers to do the same, to unpack their own life stories and explore what they have to say about the culture within which they occurred. In this way, autoethnographic work is able to address the traditional research necessity for generalizable and relatable work that speaks to its readers about broader social contexts, not just one individual’s experience:

[A] story's generalizability is always being tested - not in the traditional way through random samples of respondents, but by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Readers provide theoretical validation by comparing their lives to ours, by thinking about how our lives are similar and different and the reasons why. Some stories inform readers about unfamiliar people or lives. We can ask, after Stake, 'does the story have naturalistic generalization'? Meaning that it brings 'felt' news from one world to another and provides opportunities for the reader to have vicarious experience of the things told (Stake, 1994). The focus of generalizability moves from respondents to readers (Ellis, 2004 pg. 195).

Not only does autoethnography create bonds of shared experiences, and empathy for the experiences of others, but it also offers researchers the chance to directly and reflexively include academic literature with the personal. In this project I present you first with my snapshots, the collection of which comprise the story of my experiences in the two learning settings, and then reflection upon its relationship to related theory and literature. Richardson (2000) describes this type of work as using the 'lenses' of both art and science and I will be attempting, "to write ethnography which is both scientific—in the sense of being true to a world known through the empirical senses—and literary—in the sense of expressing what one has learned through evocative writing techniques and form" (p. 253). It is this blending that I find particularly appealing in this methodology as it allows for what feels to me like a more complete exploration of human experience; it allows for exploring, sharing and reflecting upon the realms of both the head and the heart.

I believe that it is in the blending of the lenses coupled with its embracing of subjective interpretation that this approach to autoethnography finds a niche focusing not on providing definitive answers, but working "to open up conversations about how people live, rather than close down with a definitive description and analytic statements about the world as it 'truly'

exists outside the contingencies of language and culture” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 435). With this project, I am obviously situated within a distinct position with a distinct set of beliefs regarding the material and it is my hope that by openly discussing my perspective and where it comes from I will be able to confront this intersection and offer my readers a unique perspective on a relatively universal topic, thereby encouraging them to actively reflect upon the subject, challenging both their own preconceived ideas as well as my own.

Accepting the premise that there are plural world views and multiple social realities, autoethnographic research stresses the need for researcher transparency and self-reflection, claiming one’s voice and acknowledging one’s own position within both the work and context surrounding it (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005; Wall, 2006). For me, this is not only an important part of the research process itself, in terms of my integrity as a researcher and my responsibility to my readers, but it is also a large part of why this type of work is important. If I see the world how I see it based on my historical, cultural, racial, gendered personal life then it is all the more important that we write meaningful work to share our lives, break down some of the barriers we may not see between our own experiences and those of others, and encourage readers to stop and reflect on how these stories are, and are not, similar to their own. This is also another place where the overlapping lenses of science and art fit into the work as we can use the scientific lens and more generalized academic literature to help draw parallels and connect our stories to more universal themes to which our readers can relate.

Following from the belief that culture is a lived entity in our lives, something we perform, enact and do, rather than a static object that can be separated out, frozen and studied with absolute certainty (Denzin, 2003), my approach to autoethnography will seek to enact a performance of a different perspective on our experiences of learning, thereby creating change as

it challenges readers to rethink these topics and invites them to consider a different future; redesigning the culture it explores by both reflecting it upon itself and repositioning it, showing how a different reality can be lived.

***Process: That sounds great... but how I am actually going to do all that? A grad student's struggle***

All of that theoretical discussion is all well and good but when it actually came to doing this autoethnography I went through some major conflict over just how to do it. How could I take all of what I thought about and talked about and felt about this expansive, flexible, open-ended method and somehow turn it into concrete action? Looking at my chosen guides, Ellis and Bochner (2006) discuss the difference between telling a story and then analyzing it, and fostering analysis and reflection with(in) the story itself but say little about how that is actually done. Holman-Jones (2005) asks, in her chapter on autoethnography in the Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry, just how much showing she should be doing in contrast to more traditional academic telling as she explains just what autoethnography is and how much of herself should be present in the text (and if she's not sure, how am I supposed to figure it out?).

These types of conflicts appear to typify this type of flexible, personal, work as we all strive to create a finished product that both feels authentic and whole to us as a writer and yet satisfies our audience with enough detail, information, references and exposition. In her novel/textbook exploring autoethnography, Ellis (2004) repeatedly answers questions about how to do autoethnography with some form of the statement that matters of form and content are up to the author, as long as she can explain her decisions and it makes sense for the individual project. The open-ended nature of the definition of autoethnography allows each writer to construct a form and style that works for her in that moment but without a more concrete

example of what is, or perhaps more importantly, what is not, autoethnography, it is the responsibility of each writer to outline her own expectations, criteria, and hopes for the work leaving it up to the individual readers to determine if the piece works for them or not. Personally, while this open-ended nature of the methodology made for a difficult road at times, it has always resonated very deeply with the work I wanted to do.

In resolving my own inner conflict over format and form, I found it helpful to embrace the idea of this study as an experiment, not in the scientific sense but as, “course of action tentatively adopted without being sure of the outcome” (“Experience”, 2014). Moving through the process I’ve tried different approaches, played with how I want to structure the content and done a great deal of thinking regarding how the representation of the material will shape your experience of it as a reader. I will discuss my process and final decisions in more detail below but for now I want to leave you with the understanding that the paper you are reading was undertaken with this spirit of adventure, trial and error, and excited uncertainty, as I played my way through building my wings after taking the leap.

Part of this process included reading and reflecting on different examples of autoethnography, looking at what ‘worked’ for me or what left me feeling disinterested, disengaged or dissatisfied. Reading Kaufmann’s (2011) piece on storytelling I was drawn in to the narrative as she traces her life stories from where they’ve lodged themselves in her body. I felt her presence in the beautiful poetic telling of her stories as the plot winds from camping to school and family life and then back to the storytelling itself and it left me thinking, reflecting, responding to the work. And, at first, this is what I wanted to do, something more abstract, with less citations, more open-ended pieces of narrative triggering the reader and letting her follow wherever the path of my words leads her. After some consideration, and not a little self-doubt

about my ability to write that artistically, I realized that it didn't feel right for this work. I wanted something more concrete, a vehicle in which I could still talk about theory and other related work in more detail; I want to speak a little more directly to my reader about my own thoughts on my story. Part of me can't believe I'm saying this but I want more citations, more discussion and linkages made between what happened, how those experiences were lived, and what I think of them now that I am using them for this project.

Looking for another example I am drawn back to certain examples in Ellis' work (e.g. Ellis, 1995; 2009; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and how she writes in contextualized, narrative form and yet shares with me, the reader, where her thoughts go as an academic, which related fields of study she looks to, and how she compares and contrasts them with her own story. To me, this is the ultimate use of academic work: to ask what other people have said about this and how it relates to my life or the problem with which I am grappling, and/or the topics in which I am interested. And so, perhaps needless to say at this point, this is the type of autoethnography I will strive to create: one that reaches deep into my lived experiences, sharing as honestly as I can how it felt to live in those moments, and at the same time bridges over to also share with my readers what else has been said about these topics, how my experiences support or refute other material and, perhaps most importantly, where they fit in the grand picture of what we know, and don't know, about our social culture.

### ***What autoethnography looks like when its at home (with me)***

As Richardson (1999) put it, "creative arts is one lens through which to view the world; analytical/science is another. We see better with two lenses. We see best with both lenses focused and magnified" (p. 666) and having laid the theoretical groundwork for the methodology I used, I



will turn now to talk more concretely about how I focused and magnified those lenses in this project in particular.

### **Collecting, organizing and exploring: making sense of the sense-making memories**

As noted by other autoethnographers, (e.g. Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005; Wall, 2006) the open flexibility of this methodological approach has a downside in that it doesn't come with a specific set of steps or accepted practices for the actual work being done by the individual researcher. While exciting and appealing in many ways, for a student working on a dissertation such as I am, this presented some difficulty when it came to both laying out exactly what I would do and finding specific material to cite in support of my chosen methods. Chang's *Autoethnography as Method* (2008), however, stands out in this field as it offers many specific approaches and exercises for all stages of the autoethnographic project while also reinforcing the need for individuals to choose and modify their selected activities as they see fit to match their specific project. While I drew specific techniques from Chang, I also worked closely with other texts as examples of different kinds of autoethnography in order to stay oriented and mindful of how the specific processes played out in the larger picture of the project as a whole.

Working with Chang's (2008) methods, I selected several techniques that resonated with me and appear to fit this project in particular. Discussing the interpretive subjectivity and inherent limitations of personal memory, Chang offers her readers several different exercises that can be used to trigger recollection and help the autoethnographer pull together a more detailed image of their past. For the sake of this project, where Chang refers to cultural self-discovery or

insight in her techniques and exercises I looked for material relating specifically to my experience of the learning environment and the presence of different kinds of experiences, and their role in our cultural perceptions, as I have outlined as the focus of this study.

In discussing the role and use of personal memory in autoethnography, Chang notes that it “taps into the wealth of information on self” and that “[t]hrough writing exercises of chronicling, inventorying, and visualizing self, you are encouraged to unravel your memory, write down fragments of your past and build a database for your cultural analysis and interpretation” (2008, p. 72). Reading through her chapter on memory work, I was drawn to how her offered techniques would help me frame, contextualize and plot isolated memories across the broader narrative scope of this project as well as challenging me to explore those memories from different angles and perspectives.

### **Memory work**

To begin the autoethnographic process I started with my own variations on Chang’s (Chang, 2008) memory work, building from my initial thoughts in an organic approach based on where the process led me. In the end, through trial and error, personal reflection and discussion with my supervisor as I went along, I ended up using the techniques of: creating an autobiographical timeline, listing and exploring routines, identifying and exploring artefacts and free drawing/mapping of familiar spaces (Chang, 2008).

The first set of exercises Chang describes are collected under the term ‘chronicling the past’ as they illuminate “the evolution of your personal life and sequential regularity in your life” (2008, p. 72) while helping the researcher organize and focus on key events in her life that pertain to the research topic. I, therefore, started this process by creating a personal timeline,

starting with mapping out the different ‘stages’ or ‘eras’ in my experiences and then adding more detail as I fleshed out each era with specific memories that stood out as significant, either linked directly to specific events or ongoing experiences that happened throughout that era. This timeline was a useful scaffolding for the project helping, as Chang explains, to screen and select what I included in the project and ensuring that I used my purpose statement and research focus as a “guidepost in the screening process” (Chang, 2008, p. 73). By starting with a purposeful outline was able to focus on the broader scope of the entire narrative and make sure I was mindful of what is included/excluded from the final work as a whole rather than simply jumping into the narrative first and including whatever comes to mind as I go.

Once I had the chronological framework outlined I turned to Chang’s (2008) second chronicling exercise, that of examining routines, as, “[w]hile the autobiographical timeline documents extraordinary events or moments of life, routines represent the ordinariness of life” (p. 74). Focusing on different cycles in my life such as daily, monthly, and seasonal routines, I balanced the significant moments found on the timeline with reoccurring experiences that typified different aspects of different learning settings and my experiences of them.

This exercise was very helpful in both pushing me to explore the ‘unseen’ side of my experiences in the different settings and assisting me in ‘going back’ and reliving memories more vividly. By looking at the mundane and repetitive routines in both settings I was able to flesh out my daily experiences with more detail, remembering emotions and smaller nuances of the experiences that were not captured in the broader timeline. Walking through the routines, asking myself what I did every day, what happened every week or every season, these mental exercises forced me to change my perspective slightly, moving beyond the specific memories that I consciously remember on a regular basis, those that have always made up the narrative of my

version of my past, to the little pieces I'd forgotten or not paid attention to in my recollections as they occur in normal life, resulting in a deeper understanding of the experiences themselves.

I then built from Chang's (2008) idea of visualizing the self, approaching my recollection process in a visual format using what she calls 'free drawing'. 'Free drawing' is described by Chang as drawing, "anything out of your memory: a person, object, and place" (Chang, 2008, p. 84), using diagrams or more detailed drawing techniques to explore the locations and physical settings of memories and then describing the details and significance of what has been included in the drawing and detailed visualization to once again engage the material from a new direction. By working with visual representation I was able to both organize my memories further as well as gain insight into specific details, my own emotional responses, and broader patterns of activity and experiences.

Following Chang's discussion, I sketched out floor plans for my childhood homes and my high school, thinking about how I moved through and used different settings, helping to flesh out the entirety of the recollection of specific physical spaces. When it came to drawing more detailed sketches, I actually found that process to be more distancing as I had trouble keeping up with my memories, the act of representing them artistically separating me from the process of actively remembering. Instead of this process, however, I found that walking myself through detailed visualizations in my imagination brought back much more vivid memories of both physical details and emotional responses. I utilized this technique not only during this phase of memory work but also during the narrative process, physically 'revisiting' spaces before I wrote about them, thinking about the smells, the colours, the textures and allowing my emotional responses to these triggers to come to the foreground before I attempted to write about a specific experience.

Focusing on the visual/physical side of these settings again helped me uncover forgotten details such as a memory about a specific event in photography class while also deepening my experience of my recollections as I explored the more physical side of my memories such as what colour the vinyl cover was on our breakfast nook bench or how the waxed wood on the banisters in my high school always felt sticky when the weather turned humid in the late spring. Relatively insignificant details, yes, and I didn't always include these physical details in the narratives, but exploring them for myself did foster a different kind of connection with those past eras, bringing up emotions and their physical manifestations, often before I'd really thought about them consciously.

For example, when thinking about my first class in high school and where that classroom was located in my map, I remembered sitting on the lab stools, the smell of natural gas in the air when we finally got to use the Bunsen burners and, a detail that was directly translated into the narrative, the tension in my belly when my teacher refused to allow my lab partner to go to the washroom. I remembered that story but hadn't really relived it until I imagined myself back on that stool physically, looking around the room in my mind's eye. In the same vein, I hadn't remembered the intensity of my frustration with the computer games until I stopped to think about where the computer was located in a specific house, putting myself back in the chair and 'looking around me'. In fleshing out the map, trying to 'walk through' the different spaces to look for details I was missing or not bothering to remember in my general memories, I was thereby also offered a different window into my past, one which granted me new insights and greater understanding of my experiences.

In using artefact for my memory work I hoped to help gain further insight into significant facets of my experiences as they can "explicitly or implicitly manifest societal norms and values"

(Chang, 2008, p. 80) and, I believe, offer a distinct reflective exercise as I selected and then discussed pertinent items and their significance (see Appendix for description of artefacts). Looking to my own keepsakes and asking my mom to share what she had put away over the years I ended up with an assortment of documents from school, birthday cards, drawings and paintings, photographs, yearbooks, school assignments and other miscellany (i.e. swimming lesson badges, samples of knitting and other crafts etc.). Examining each item, I reflected on both its significance at the time when it was received/made/purchased and the fact that it was something either my mother or I decided to keep, an indication of its significance in the broader narrative of our lives. The more general items such as swimming lesson badges and birthday cards I found to be helpful in the same way the free drawing worked to offer me a new vantage point on the past, a different point to focus on, another approach to reflecting on what I did and how I felt about it. The photos and yearbooks assisted in my physical memories of spaces and events, helping me put myself back in the moment and relive the experiences in the photos themselves and/or more generally of that 'era'. The more specific, for lack of a better word, items such as the written assignments and personal artwork, were also triggers that gave me insight into some of my own experiences more directly, showing what I did with my time based on the output of a given activity.

My process of working with these artefacts centred largely on looking at and/or reading and then casting my memory back to its original temporal context, thinking about when/how it came into my life. I reflected, wrote and used each piece as a jumping in point to that period of time, exploring experiences and emotions. I also reflected more cognitively in my writing about the artefacts, thinking of their significance in the broader cultural context of my life and, as Chang discusses, the norms and values reflected in/by the items themselves. In this way, the

artefacts were helpful in exploring the both personal experiential and cultural sides of my autoethnographic work.

By the end of this work I was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the collection of material I had amassed and struggled to keep it all fresh and available in my mind, not to mention organized into some kind of broader narrative tapestry. I had notes from my reflection processes but the branches of thought and exploration of the material began to become somewhat unwieldy and I feared losing connection with my more vivid memories if I engaged in too much analysis and structural organization of the material. For my autoethnographic writing I wanted the memories to be fresh and raw rather than sorted, dissected and organized neatly according to a preconceived image in my head, I wanted to write about my experiences and see what I could learn from that process, not write about experiences that I already knew would tell me what I wanted to hear. And so, at this point I chose to take the raw memory and emotional material and begin writing about my experiences in the two different settings, exploring my memories as they came, following inspirations and sudden recollections as they surfaced in connection with one another, rather than according to a distinct outline.

My notes and thoughts from the memory work, therefore, triggered recall and inspired the narratives, helping me get back in touch with my memories more specifically and from different vantage points, facilitating the reflection process of my writing rather than directing it. I purposefully chose not to use systematic analysis or detailed categorization of my memory material prior to my writing stage as I wanted to use the writing to help tease out the story rather than filling in the pieces I'd already decided upon and then engage in analysis after the story was written, rather than using it to inform the narrative itself. Inspired by Richardson's discussions of writing as inquiry, as I've explained above, with this project I wanted to, "...write because I want

to find something out... in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it" (Richardson, 1994, p. 517). I saw this flow as being a significant part of the process as it allowed me to turn my attention to different memories that at first I would not have seen as related but, upon reflection, was able to place in the material and uncover new perspectives and insights into the topic which I don't feel I would have had if I had made and stuck to a thematic outline from the outset. This organic, 'bottom-up', process let the experiences and my subconscious speak more for themselves, helping in a small way to separate the work from any predetermined thematic directions or expectations that I held at the outset. This is not to say that I see this work as being undirected or detached from my interpretation but rather that I felt that I was able build a work that stood as its own story rather than creating a predetermined structure and simply writing stories to plug into specific spots of the narrative that I wanted to create.

Rather than deriving a list of specific episodes to include or list of themes I wanted to cover, which is what I thought it would do, therefore, this memory work ended up being more 'atmospheric' and essentially laid the foundation for the writing. With the background of memories (including sensory and emotional recollections) established through the memory work, I then turned to writing the snapshots and, through a process of trial and error, eventually found a comfortable place essentially following a kind of stream of consciousness, flowing from one memory to the next as they surfaced or came to mind, informed, fleshed out and triggered by the more concrete recollective processes taken from Chang's (2008) methods.

## **Journaling**

Throughout this process of memory work, and as I wrote the autoethnographic material itself, I kept journals in various forms following my thought process, different insights,



epiphanies and reactions I had to what I was doing. These journals helped me explore my process and gave me a space to vent some of the pressure I felt from the immensity of the material I was working with. Overwhelmed at first with the amount of material I could write about, the numerous possibilities for what I could include, and the complex relationships between the countless threads and ideas of what I was working with, journaling helped me ‘download’ some of those thoughts, setting them aside to look at and either keep or discard if I found they didn’t help me in pursuing my overall purpose with this study in particular. Journaling also helped me stay rooted in that purpose by actively reflecting on my process within its context, returning to my guiding questions and focus through active exploration of how everything I was thinking and doing would come together in the end.

## **Writing**

My actual writing process was a fluid combination of visualization/meditative reflection, writing, reading, more reflecting, editing and rewriting. Following a gut instinct, focusing on my research goals for the paper and my intuitive sense of what worked for the piece from an aesthetic perspective, I followed my own train of thought, writing about episodes and experiences as they flowed from one to another, sometimes deleting portions when I realized I’d drifted off course from my topic, sometimes going back to include a new snapshot that suddenly sprang to mind as related to an earlier entry. I wrote the story into being hoping to share not just my experiences with you but also my interpretation of them and their context within my broader life narrative (a important factor from my interpretive perspective) as well as the cultural context within which I saw them occurring. As an interpretive exercise, I felt that a more organic

approach such as this would bring my own perceptions and reflections to the surface, based on what came to mind, what demanded to be included and what felt 'right'.

After much editing and reflecting and tweaking, I felt that I came up with a collection of experiential snapshots that not only shared my experiences but also told a broader story about them. A story that explored the concepts of learning, structure, how we experience these two phenomena in relation to each other, and the outcomes of the intersection of these factors.

### ***Ethical questions and quandaries***

In moving ahead with this work I was very aware of the ethical question of representing others in my work (e.g. Ellis, 1995; 2009; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). As opposed to traditional research ethical considerations monitored by research boards at our universities, this type of ethical concern is what Ellis (2007) calls 'relational ethics' which centres around the harm potentially posed to our personal relationships when undertaking this kind of work. Writing personal stories involving actual people in my life, I lose the traditional ethical shield of anonymity and despite all efforts on my part I ran the risk that, "characters may become increasingly recognizable to [my] readers, though they may not have consented to being portrayed in ways that would reveal their identity; or, if they did consent, they might not understand exactly to what they had consented" (Ellis, 2007, p. 14). While my topic is less likely to raise issues with those in my narrative than some of the examples Ellis uses in her paper on ethics and autoethnography (i.e. domestic violence, abuse, intimate portrayals of serious illness), I still run the risk of hurting people I care about if they disagree with how I represent them or would rather some aspect(s) of our shared experiences were not shared with the world via this paper. Reflecting upon this conflict, Ellis' words come back to me once again, "how do we

honour our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in a complex and truthful way for readers?" (Ellis, 2007, p. 14). How indeed?

On a broad level Ellis (2007) directs her students, and readers of the piece, to "act from our hearts and minds... and maintain conversations" (p. 4) stressing that we have to "live the experience of doing research with intimate others, think it through, improvise, write and rewrite, anticipate and feel its consequences" (p.22-23) because "there is no one set of rules to follow" (p. 22-23). As a student, this advice is encouraging and yet not all that helpful but I love that it resonates with everything else I've read about this approach to research: that there is no easy answer, no flowchart to follow, no concrete directions that you must apply in all circumstances.

In my writing I followed Ellis' (2007) advice on how proceed with this type of work given the unique ethical dilemmas it can create:

I tell them to think about ethical considerations before writing, but not to censure anything in the first draft to get the story as nuanced and truthful as possible. Then, I warn, now you must deal with the ethics of what to tell. Don't worry. We'll figure out how to write this ethically. There are strategies to try. You might omit things, use pseudonyms or composite characters, alter the plot or scene, position your story within the stories of others, occasionally decide to write fiction (p. 24).

As I wrote I kept in mind her direction to hold relational concerns in just as high a standard as the research, to not let it negatively affect my life, my relationships, or those of others and, perhaps most importantly, to "research from an ethic of care" (Ellis, 2007, p. 25).

More specifically, I used pseudonyms for everyone beside myself in the work (including false initials for the teachers) and created composite (Glover, 2007) characters in some cases so that readers won't always know if it was one individual in particular or a combination of similar conversations amalgamated together (Ellis, 2004). At different times I also purposefully stepped back and considered how I was presenting someone else and did what I could to strip away any

unnecessary descriptors that would make potential identification at all possible, as well as reflecting on my perspective of the experience and doing what I could to stay true to my memory specifically and recognize my interpretation of the events in the text itself.

### ***The story: the final (re)presentation***

This type of autoethnographic story has been described as a personal narrative (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010) or a ‘mystory’ (Denzin, 2003), in which the author sees herself as the phenomenon of the study with the goal being to understand some facet of her lived experience within a social context. Political, cultural, historical and personal contexts are a key component of this kind of work, focusing on locating the individual experience in the social world within which it was lived. Denzin’s (2003) mystories engage the author’s story by interrogating the realities it presents, calling on the author to reflect on what is seen and unseen in the story they are sharing as the work moves between three levels of discourse: the personal, the popular and the expert. Ellis’ (Ellis, 2004) description of personal narratives describes inviting the reader into the author’s life in order to encourage readers to relate the material to their own lives and how the narrative can help them to “reflect on, understand and cope with their own lives” (p. 45). In this way these works build on an ethic of care, concern, and broader responsibility as they challenge readers to reflect, digest and think about how the singular, subjective, experience relates to the broader, generalizable culture.

This is not to say all writing about the self is able to meet these goals. As discussed above, reading autoethnographic work is just as subjective a process as is writing one. The ability to effectively blend both lenses, to provide enough detail and discussion to satisfy the scientific needs without sacrificing the artistic expression, and vice versa, is an aspect of this

work which I found somewhat daunting, especially since there was no specific criteria, no outline to follow, no previous dissertations I could pull down from the shelf to emulate.

I knew that I am drawn to the artistic and long to write more abstract texts but the feared my work drifting too far from the science, worried about my readers finding nothing to grasp onto, no discussion or linkages to larger ideas to help them locate this work in the broader context. This fear reigned me in when I got lost in the writing but left me struggling with how to write evocative, challenging texts without losing my balance, and thereby losing my audience to criticisms of narcissistic, egocentric, self-exposition rather than autoethnographic research. I know both kinds of writing when I see them, but how did I know what kind it was that I was writing? Reed-Danahay offers the following distinction, “[t]he line between narcissism and effective ethnographic writing lies often... in the writing abilities of the author and in his/her ability to make use of his/her own experiences as a way to teach us about our craft itself and/or the social worlds of those ‘others’ who are the participants in our research” (2002 pg. 424). Throughout my writing this idea and those I’ve cited above resonated as touchstones or mantras for me to return to when feeling uncertain.

In the end, I considered many different formats for the final presentation of the snapshots and my reflection upon them including: looking at weaving reflection and narrative together, speaking in different voices representing different layers of my engagement with the material, and stripping back the reflection to let the narrative stand alone, amongst others. Ultimately, however, when I came back to my research questions and the goal of this work I felt that the best representation was to include the snapshots on their own followed by a more academic, albeit still very personal, reflection on their content and my experience of revisiting the experiences they describe. This process was inspired by the format of Ellis’ Revision (2009), in which she

revisits previously written autoethnographic works, following the more evocative texts with what she calls ‘meta-autoethnography’, a more detailed discussion and analysis of the autoethnographic approaches and substantive content. I chose this approach because I found this text to be particularly engaging as I was able to immerse myself in one style of reading at a time, losing myself in her experiences before stepping back to cast a more critical cognitive eye over the content and form of what I’d just read. And I hope that, in some small way at least, I will be able to do the same for you, dear reader.

### ***How do we know if it’s working (the criteria I’ve chosen)***

Richardson’s (2000) criteria for CAP are used widely in this area of research and, more importantly, appeal to me as a framework that covers all aspects of what I want my work to be and what I want it to do for you, my reader. I am, therefore, offering her five criteria to you to reflect upon and hold up against my work to measure its success. It is my hope, therefore, that you will find that it offers a substantive contribution, contains aesthetic merit and reflexivity, makes an impact, and offers a ‘true-sounding’ expression of a reality (Richardson, 2000).

The first criteria of substantive contribution relates, for me, to the science end of the spectrum as it asks how the work contributes to our shared understanding of the culture and/or social world within which the lived experience occurred. For me, this is a very important facet of autoethnographic work of this nature and while it is not always easy to balance this with the artistic expression, I believe it to be a primary component of what I would call successful autoethnographic writing. With the final presentation format I have chosen, this part of the autoethnographic work comes in the reflection section and conclusion as I discuss my thoughts on both what I learned in the writing and how I see my work relating to the broader sociocultural academic literature existing in related fields of study. In this way my artistic expression, the

autoethnographic narratives, and the analytical discussion come together in the final paper to meet this criteria.

The second criteria, obviously, swings to the other end of the spectrum asking how successful the writing is as an artistic expression, does it succeed aesthetically, offering a complex and engaging read that is open to reflection and engagement on the part of the reader? This criteria, I hope, is satisfied in the narratives themselves as well as the overall tone and content of the paper in its entirety. Keeping one portion of my attention attuned to this criteria as I wrote and created this work formed what I would call my 'gut instinct' as I put my faith in my competency as a writer and creator when faced with decisions of presentation, format or form. I also looked to other examples of autoethnography, as cited above, to draw inspiration for what I felt works, or doesn't, in this type of project.

The third criteria, reflexivity, is a little more complicated as it asks the reader to reflect upon the piece from a different perspective, asking about the creation of the text and the author's transparency in the broader research/writing process (Richardson, 2000). Asking how the text came to be written, how information was gathered, what ethical issues were confronted and the level of self-awareness demonstrated by the author is not something the layperson, and perhaps some in academia, are used to doing in this way. This type of critical perspective, however, comes part and parcel with the postmodernist, subjective interpretivist foundation of this kind of work that discards authorial omniscience and embraces situated, plural knowings of the world (e.g. Denzin, 2003; Ellis, 2009; Holman Jones, 2005) a stance which, as noted above by Richardson (2000), places a great deal of responsibility on the researcher to be clear about where she is coming from, how her perspective has shaped her research and to what authority is she laying claim. In this way, I hope that the rest of the paper, the introduction, literature review, and

this discussion of my methodological approach, have offered you enough insight into both who I am as a researcher and how I've gone about creating the work you are reading.

The impact made by the piece, Richardson's fourth criteria, is perhaps the most important of all because if a piece fails in this way, to me, it is an utter failure. Describing these criteria, Richardson asks the reader to ask how the piece has affected her both emotionally and intellectually, whether or not it has generated questions or motivated the reader to act, write or engage in new research practices themselves (Richardson, 2000). Looking at these facets of the criteria I find myself feeling nervous, worried that my work will alienate you, won't inspire you to act or will fall flat, feeling important to me but not resonating with anyone my audience. I suppose this is a concern for all researchers; we are, hopefully, passionate about our work, our subject area, and yet have to recognize that the rest of the world may not find our little corner of research as fascinating as we do. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's a standard trope in sitcoms: the passionate yet delightfully myopic intellectual who waxes at length about their work and cannot understand why no one else wants to hear about the mating habits of the willy-wonky beetle or the existential metaphor inherent in their selection of a cappuccino over a latte. Part of what I love about Richardson's criteria is that she includes emotional and intellectual impact, which, to me, has always been a large part of how I engage with research, especially this type of narrative text. Research that separates the head from the heart has always felt lacking to me and it's been a pleasure and a relief to have found a niche where other authors feel the same way (Ellis, 2009; Holman Jones, 2005).

I hope that my work will be meaningful and have an impact on my readers' lives and, again, believe that awareness of this criteria and keeping a mindful eye on the potential impact of my work will have helped me create a more successful autoethnography. Keeping this criteria in



mind, seeing it every day written in bold sharpie marker on an index card hanging above my desk, has inspired me to dig deeper, to challenge my places of discomfort and allow my writing to venture into new areas of vulnerability and personal disclosure, sharing with you the more emotional and meaningful experiences in these settings in the hopes that they will resonate somehow, somewhere, with your own.

The final criterion of expressing a reality is something that lies at the very heart of creative analytic practice and autoethnographic work. If I, as a researcher, cannot create a work that feels 'real' to the reader, it's ability to create an impact will be hampered and will be unable to offer any significant insight into our 'real' world because its validity as an interlocutor cannot be trusted. Layered with this need for verisimilitude is an inherent limitation of human memory, the possibility of selective memory retention and the highlighting of certain aspects based on our subsequent experiences and how we construct our personal story of our lives (i.e. the episodes we see as important, the details that we remember because they support a specific belief etc....). In addressing this issue, in her writing on autoethnography Ellis emphasizes the need to recognize that each story is a depiction of one version of 'reality' and acknowledging that, as authors, we can explore our memories as they exist to us but that they will forever be limited, partial and incomplete with regard to an abstract external factual depiction of events (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010).

Coming back to Richardson's criteria, however, what this means for my work is that the reality that I present rests in the interpretivist perspective of plural social realities existing between individuals. The criteria demands, however, that I strive to create an image of my reality, a description of how I see the world that can be seen by readers as something that is true for that writer. This criterion called me back to an undergraduate course I took in fantasy

literature in which the professor repeated the distinction between ‘good’ speculative fiction and ‘bad’ was that the good fiction ‘feels real in its unreality’. What he meant by that was that even though the world created in the fiction was obviously not the everyday world we live in, the writer talks about it with enough depth of detail and works the story within it with enough consistency and authenticity that they create a sense of verisimilitude despite the obviously fabricated elements of the supernatural or mythical. And while I am not writing about dragons or magic in my autoethnographic narratives I am sharing my own internal world, my thoughts, reactions and perspectives and to make it feel ‘real’ to someone who has experienced life differently. More specifically, to create a sense of reality I have strived to: offer enough detail to flesh out that world for you, my readers; present a consistent reality you can trust as you move with me through the stories; and create an authentic presentation of my lived experiences that you can connect with and imagine as if it were your own. Speaking as a semi-outsider in the world of school and education I am especially aware that my perspectives on this topic, and therefore how I present my lived experiences surrounding them, may differ greatly from those of most of my readers and have, therefore, done my best to ensure that this difference does not impede your sense of ‘reality’ in my story and your ability to connect to it on all levels.

### ***Making meaning through analysis and reflection***

When it came time to reflect upon my work and analyze my narrative, I was once again forging my own path, following a combination of what felt right for the project and what I’d read in my methodological guiding material. I’m not going to go into detail about that process here because you still have the snapshots to read between now and then, assuming you’re reading this in a linear fashion but, as I said, you’re welcome to do otherwise if you so choose, and I think it

will make more sense if you read about this process just before reading the actual reflection section itself.

I am also choosing to keep this current discussion brief as I would like you to approach the snapshots themselves as a distinct part of this work and do not want to give you too much direction before you are able to do so, hoping to allow you as much space as I can to engage the material yourself for your own interpretation. I will say, however, that my reflection on the material was just as complex and experimental a process as the rest of this work has been but that in following my sense of what ‘worked’ and keeping an eye tuned on both my goals and the methodological principles and values discussed above, I was able to find a theory that helped orient my reflections and frame them within the context of this work. Following my inspiration from Ellis’ (2009) method, this reflection was undertaken as a form of ‘meta-autoethnography’ reflecting on not only the substantive content of the narrative but also its form and the process of its creation offering, “a framework that marks and holds the scenes in place, at least for this moment, one that moves from beginning to end and circles back to the beginning again” (p. 13), exploring the story itself as an expression of understanding as well as material reflecting sociocultural beliefs, mores, expectations and norms.

I did attempt, at first, a somewhat more categorical analysis and found some underlying themes that cut through most of the snapshots but when it came to discussing these factors in a broader context I found their intersectionality, cyclical relationships and interdependence difficult to clarify. This is where I was relieved to find a theory that echoed much of what I was trying to say about my experiences in the two learning settings, framing my observations and helping to organize my thoughts. Obviously, this is one interpretation of the material, one specifically tinted lens that I chose to look through, and I hope that as you read the actual

autoethnographic work below you will pause and consider your own thoughts, what themes or repeating ideas spring to mind for you, before you move ahead into my discussion of the experiences.

***Ready? Good, because we're about to get started***

And there you have it, the substantive and methodological foundation upon which I build this work. Your understanding of where I am coming from at the beginning of this work is important to me not just so that we're on the same substantial page and sharing an understanding of the position of this work in the broader scope of the literature (although that is important too) but also so that you're aware of who I am and where I am coming from as a researcher and writer. As I've said above, I see this project as being, hopefully, dialectic in nature, offering you an active engagement with the material rather than just a transmission of ideas from me to you and, as such, I hope that these past two chapters have helped illuminate my position in all this material thereby giving you a framework of sorts in which to contextualize the project as a whole.

And now, without further ado, I ask that you leave this portion of the paper behind and forge ahead to explore my autoethnography on its own, as an expression of my (hopefully) evocative and personal experiences in two different learning settings.

Happy reading.

## **Scene: A proposal, modest or otherwise**

*And here I am, still in the woods. They've changed shape and I've roamed around a fair bit but it's still lovely and wild and full of surprising new things to find. It took me a bit but I've found my stride and have come a fair distance, free from the crushing uncertainty that held me in place, that fear of taking a step lest it end up leading in the wrong direction.*

*The difference is that after enough reading and thinking and writing I finally figured out what I needed to move ahead with my journey. I needed a compass.*

*Once I realized that was all I was missing, I turned to the resources I had and built myself one.*

*First of all, I had to decide on my final destination. Having a compass doesn't help much if you don't know in which direction want to travel but once I settled my research questions and purpose statement I was ready to start making plans.*

*Next came the compass itself. I realized I couldn't trust my ability to navigate through the woods, to maintain a course, ignore distractions and, perhaps most importantly, find my way back to the route when I lost it, if I didn't have some kind of orienting force that I could refer to. While my primary resources never offered me specific concrete steps, their insight, broader goals, ideals and theories, gave me a steady course to align my route to. Like the magnetic arrow in a compass that always points north, these texts were my constant, the steady and reliable grounding that pointed in the same direction no matter how far off course I drifted.*

*The magnetic arrow of a compass always points North and you can orient yourself in other directions in a general manner if that is all you have but with the addition of a divided dial marking the other four directions and the various finer points of degree between them, you can*

*find the specific path you need to take. The dial offers a context in which to use the information from the magnetic arrow, allowing us to use that information in a more concrete and individualized manner. In my compass, this dial, created by the methodological tools and skills I'd picked up over the course of seven years in graduate school, allowed me to apply the consistent information from the arrow to the context of my own journey and fine tune my intentions, carving out a path that was uniquely my own and uniquely suited to the journey I wished to take.*

*Now all of that is well and good but a compass is not going to get you anywhere on its own. To get anywhere in the wilds I knew I had to be willing to move; I had to put one foot in front of the other and, by sheer force of my own will and desire, move myself along the route I'd chosen. And sometimes that's been the hardest part. I know I'm walking the right path, the one that challenges me and leads me somewhere new, if it's one that has a few dead ends, if it's one with uphill and downhill portions, if it runs through both sunlit highs and dark hallows. If it was all flat meadows and sunshine, I wouldn't have learned nearly as much, wouldn't have had to challenge myself and change my perspective, wouldn't have had to do the work I know I wanted to do.*

*It wasn't easy.*

*On my journey I developed blisters as my vulnerabilities were exposed to the friction of new ideas and new perspectives. I got hungry and tired when the path seemed to be going nowhere or I had to backtrack and start again and I had lots of times when I dreamed of an easier path, some kind of trail to tell me where to step next. But trusting my own commitment, my understanding of the texts that shaped my compass, and the guiding voices of my committee and fellow grad students, I made it through.*

*Well, I made it through the first stage of the journey, anyway.*

*I blink and the forest is gone and I'm standing in the washroom on the third floor. My heart hammers in my chest as I glance at my watch. I look back into the mirror, grateful to be alone in the small room. I force a smile and watch it turn real as my reflection returns it hesitantly. I tug at my shirt and smooth a hand over my hair.*

*Time to look back over my recent travels and see if I ended up where I hoped to go.*

*I leave the bathroom and head back to the conference room I've booked for my proposal defence, shaking with both anxiety and excitement.*

## **Chapter 4 (*Narratives*): "Yet by your gracious patience, I will a round [and mostly] unvarnished tale deliver"<sup>3</sup>**

### ***Small Town Suburbia (Primary Grades)*<sup>4</sup>**

This story starts in a small suburban town, Aurora, located about an hour North of Toronto in the mid-1980s. We moved to Spruce Street when I was about five and, looking back over the landscape of my childhood, this house looms largest in my memory. Reflecting on my experience of homeschooling for the purposes of this study, I found myself trying to understand just how the handful of years we spent there figured more prominently in my memories and am still unsure. Is it because of the age I was at that time? Still young enough to engage in all sorts of imaginary play but old enough to construct more complex games and, perhaps more significantly, old enough to remember in detail a lot of what I experienced there? Was it something specific about the circumstances, the games we played, the people we lived with? Was I just happier there? More engaged and invested in what I was doing because it was a happy era? Did we just live there longer? I don't suppose I'll ever know the why but that doesn't change the fact that it's there, firmly lodged in my memory as 'my childhood home'.

There were seven permanent residents of the house: myself, my mom, my aunt, and my four siblings (my brother and sister and my two cousins who have been more like another brother and sister for as long as I can remember). A much older cousin and her baby also stayed with us for long stretches at a time later on, along with various foster siblings and friends who wove in and out of our lives. My dad lived with the woman who would later become my stepmother in

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<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, W. *Othello* (Act I, scene iii). This source retrieved online October 1, 2014 from <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/othello/full.html>.

<sup>4</sup> N.B. Just a reminder from your friendly neighborhood autoethnographer: My name is the only real name used in this work: the initials used for my teachers are not actually their own and my siblings' names have been changed to give everyone included in these narratives as much anonymity as I can. I've also used Ellis' techniques of amalgamating



downtown Toronto and we saw them every few weeks or so but they were not directly involved in my day-to-day experiences of homeschooling.

The town was, at the time, relatively small, with an approximate population of 25,000 (Town of Aurora, 2015) who consisted largely of white middle-class families (Statistics Canada, 1990) As a kid it didn't occur to me to consider these factors, they were just the background of how I generally saw the world at that age, assuming most families were like mine except in the obvious ways I knew we were different (e.g. homeschooling and natural medicines, which were much more 'out there' back in the 1980's). The fact that I didn't notice these features, don't remember playing with many kids who weren't white and seemingly middle-class, points more to the dominance of these factors in the community than my attention or lack thereof, I would assume. While we never had much money, I would argue that our family fell into the middle-class as we had loads of educational material in the home, my parents and aunt were university educated, demonstrated a sense of their own power and efficacy within our society and valued egalitarian relationships with us kids (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2007; Markus, 2013). This general sociocultural context remained relatively consistent throughout my childhood, reflected in both my memories of homogeneous social circles and documents like photos from my sports teams (see Appendix B) and our homeschooling groups/events.

The house we lived in at the time was the model home for the subdivision, placed sideways in the middle of the plot of land leaving two side yards on either side of the house rather than the small front patch of grass and larger open space behind the house which all of our neighbours had. The front of the house was surrounded by tall evergreen shrubbery and trees, dense green boughs shielding hollow centres perfect for hiding and fort building, with space

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repeating or related experiences into singular situations and collapsing multiple people into singular characters at some points in the narrative to maintain both a manageable narrative structure and more anonymity where possible.

enough between them and the brick of the house for racing back and forth in endless games of tag, resulting in a permanent dirt path where grass was never given the chance to sprout, despite my mom's ongoing attempts to reseed the area.

The house design also always struck me as being 'sideways' and strange, something I always liked about it, in comparison to more 'normal' two story homes I was used to. I found out later it was just what people called a 'side-split' and was not particularly special at all. To me, however, the short staircases, the living room half a floor above the ground level and the bedrooms half a floor above that, they were essential parts of how the house worked and, for a homeschooling child who spent the vast majority of all her time in and around that house, how the house 'worked' was a very important matter indeed. The split-levels meant we had multiple spaces to play without being cut off entirely from everyone else. Mom was always within easy shouting distance and it felt more 'together' to me than our previous home with one big staircase cutting off the bedrooms from the rest of the house. You could stand at the far end of the upstairs hallway and see straight past all the bedrooms, down the five stairs, past the steps to the front hall on one side and the doorway into the kitchen on the other, through the living room and all the way to the other end of the house where the dining room branched off from the living room. Why am I including this architectural detailing here? I don't really know except that the feeling of this house is important to me. We played everywhere in it, we roamed and ran, converted furniture into forts and climbing apparatus, chased and rolled through all the spaces, and I think its openness and variety contributed to that play. I don't remember many quiet spaces in it but I also don't remember needing any.

Our activities ranged from converting the entire dining room into a star cruiser complete with sheets draped over the long dining room table and control panels drawn on its underside for

reclined navigation of the ship, to sitting on the thick vinyl-covered bench in the breakfast nook (oh, the eighties) working our way through various bright yellow academic workbooks. Our days consisted largely in doing whatever it was we felt like doing at the time. We had rules but I don't remember having many. Physical violence or hurtful words were not allowed, we were expected to be safe regarding things like the stove or the road outside but I don't remember rules about them. We didn't cross the street without telling an adult where we were going and we didn't do things like turn on the stove or light candles without adult help but I don't remember these behaviours resting in external restrictions or abstract rules, it was just how you did or didn't do things. If we did hurt someone else or had a conflict we couldn't solve on our own, I remember my mom, and to a lesser extent my aunt who worked outside the home as a supply teacher, sitting down and talking to us, asking us why we did what we did and how we felt both while we did it and upon reflection after the fact. I suppose these were restrictions but to me they felt natural, logical and comfortable. The worst thing that ever happened because of our behaviour was that we weren't allowed to play with the other kids for a while and had to stay with an adult because we hadn't respected the others' right to safety.

We had outings to places like the library, a local conservation area, or the swimming pool, and those were decided upon by general consensus when they were flexible and by statement of fact from my mom when they weren't (i.e. library books are due today so at some point we have to at least go there and drop them all off). I have no idea how often we went out versus how many days we spent at home but I remember a lot of outdoor playtime, in local parks or just in our yard, running games and imaginative play, exploring and using what was around us to enrich whatever task or game we had chosen at that moment. I read a lot and have many fond memories of the books my mom read aloud with all five of us scattered around the living room

colouring, doodling, or just sitting and listening to series like the *Narnia* or *Little House on the Prairie* books.

### **Games to pass the time**

I sit with my mom in the strange hallway outside the pool where some of the other kids are taking swimming lessons. I'm younger, about six maybe, and my class is on a different night. I am bored of the books my mom brought to entertain me but excited by the prospect of time to play with my mom all by myself.

"Can we play the shopping game?" I ask. I can't remember how this game started but it was a staple for killing time at the pool.

"Sure, let me think."

I wait as patiently as I can, bouncing from one foot to the other.

"Okay, first, go get me some ground beef," she says.

I nod, serious about taking on this responsibility, before dashing off to the other end of the low corridor. I 'grab' a pound of ground beef off the shelf I imagine taking the place of the tall lockers and, carrying it in both hands dash back to deposit it at her feet.

"Perfect, now I need onions and garlic and peppers and canned tomatoes," she says.

"I know what it is, its spaghetti!" I cry, tossing my hands in the air.

"Wait and see," she says, her eyes twinkling at me.

I toss my head and groan before returning to the 'store' at the end of the hallway and grab these imaginary items, nestling them in the crook of my left arm that I've crossed in front of my chest. Back again, the items delivered,

"Onions and garlic and peppers and canned tomatoes," I reiterate.

“Now I need apples and potatoes, and brown sugar, milk, butter and oatmeal,” she nods in response to my furrowed brows; she’s not making a mistake.

I stand still for a moment, balancing on one foot, until it comes to me,

“Chilli and mashed potatoes and apple crisp for dessert,” I crow, jumping up and down in excitement, “You tricked me!”

“I tried to,” she laughs, “but you caught me.”

I tear away down the hallway, making a token flailing reach towards the ‘shelf’ and race back, delighted with my success and the new fun of the trick answer added to our game.

That following weekend we pile into the station wagon for the seemingly endless drive downtown to visit my dad. In reality, the drive takes about an hour and I like the quiet time in the car but it still feels like it takes an immense amount of time to make our way from our driveway to his door.

“Mom, ask me a question,” my little sister asks, looking up from the middle of the bench seat in the front. She gets to ride up front most of the time because she gets carsick in the back but I have a secret suspicion that she doesn’t always get as sick as she says she does. Not believing her makes me feel bad, though, so I don’t mention to anyone.

“What kind of question?” my mom asks, clearly confused.

“She means a trivia question,” I pipe up from the middle row.

“Oh, okay. Let me see,” my mom frowns for a moment, concentrating as she changes lanes around a slow truck, “can you name me, let’s say five, different animals you might see at the zoo?”

“Elephant, monkey, snake, lizard, lions, and hippos,” my sister rattles off the list easily.

“That’s six,” my brother points out from the seat next to me. “My turn now.”

“Okay, hmm,” my mom pauses so long I think she’s forgotten we’re supposed to be playing the game. “Tell me the three states of matter water can take and how it changes between them.”

“That’s easy, water can freeze into ice, melt into water or boil into steam.”

“My turn,” I say as soon as he’s done.

“How many different kinds of metal can you name?” she asks, her eyes darting off the road to meet mine in the rear-view mirror. I don’t know how she manages to do that and find my eyes so quickly but she always does.

“What do you mean?” I am confused. Metal is metal.

“Like steel and copper,” my brother chimes in.

“Don’t, it’s my question,” I pout.

“He’s just helping you out, sweetie. There are different kinds of metal like he said, you know how pennies are a different colour than dimes and some things made out of metal are harder than others, that’s because it’s different material, different combinations of chemicals make different types of metal.”

“Oh,” I sit there digesting this information as I stare out the window and watch my favourite stretch of the Don Valley Parkway roll by, the hills of the valley gliding up from the highway blanketed by the solid green canopy of treetops, “Like tinfoil is different from the metal parts of the car?”

“Exactly!” I can only see her eyes but I know she’s smiling at me in the mirror.

“Can I have a different question, though? I don’t know the names of metals.”

“I do,” my brother exclaims.

“Okay, then that will be your next question, John. Mandy,<sup>5</sup> let’s see... can you tell me about how we make maple syrup?”

I smile, remembering our trip to the conservation area a few weeks ago, “They take the sap from the trees and collect it in those little buckets and then boil it all in the big pots and then there’s syrup,” I say in a rush.

“Right on,” my mom smiles again and moves on to ask my cousin a question about the kings and queens of Narnia and I finish the ride to my dad’s playing along, waiting my turn for my personal question and doing my best not to blurt out the answers for everyone else’s.

### **“School” subjects**

“Mom, I’m bored,” I run my fingers over the back of her chair, loving the texture of the vinyl and the sudden cold of the metal piping alternating under my fingertips.

“Well, why don’t you read a book?” she suggests absently, looking over my brother’s shoulder.

“I did, I just finished it and I have nothing to read now,” I moan, tracing a single finger along the edge of the chrome frame.

“We just got those new math books, do you want to sit here and work with John?”

“Maybe,” I draw the word out as I weigh my options. Math is not really my favourite activity but I’m bored and like solving the puzzles in the questions. “What kind of math are they?”

She rifles through the stack of glossy yellow workbooks and pulls one out, setting it on the table beside her, “Here, take a look and see if you like anything in there.”

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<sup>5</sup> My full name is Amanda but everyone called me Mandy until, at about 10 or so, I decided it was a childish name and far too girly for me (although I don’t know that I understood my discomfort with it as such very clearly then) and switched back Amy which was part of a pet name my mom had used when I was very small: Amy-Beth.

I climb up onto the bench of the breakfast nook and kneel on the seat, leaning forward over the workbook as my mom turns to explain something to my brother.

The cover is always the same, a streaky picture of kids walking and carrying books on a yellow background. I flip it open and go immediately to the pages of stickers at the back. Bright colours and bold fonts leap off the page at me. ‘Way to go!’ and ‘Yes!’ and ‘A+!’ shout out encouragement and affirmation of correct answers. I flick my finger along the edge of one sticker, peeling it back slightly.

“What do you think?” my mom asks, turning back to me.

I shrug, “Lemme see,” I say before flipping through the pages looking at the different math problems. The first few pages are basic addition and subtraction; I can do that already, so I skip ahead.

“Oh, I like these ones,” I say, looking up to nod at my mom as I point to the page I found.

“Filling in the missing number to complete the equation?” she smiles at me and hands me a pencil. I breeze through the first page and move on to find something more challenging.

“Subtraction with double digits, do you remember how to do that?” my mom asks, pointing at the rows of stacked numbers filling the page where I paused in my flipping.

“I think so,” I try my hand at the questions as my mom gets up to start lunch. Checking my answers against the key in the back, I got more wrong than I expected. I’m kind of frustrated but also curious as to where I went wrong in the process. Eager to solve the mystery, I go back and scan the questions, running my finger over the numbers as I walk through what I did in the ones I got wrong. They look okay to me and I’m confused by the fact that my numbers don’t match the one in the back of the book. After double-checking that I’m looking at the correct



section of answers, I sit there and stare at the page for a long moment, my pencil lodged solidly between my teeth as I think.

I know the subtraction itself is right (or is now that I corrected that one question - five minus two is not four), but in a lot of them my answer is still way off. I tighten my jaw, enjoying the faint crunch and crush as my teeth poke through the paint on the pencil to sink into the wood beneath. Mulling over what I know about subtraction I realize that I've been just doing 'long-number' adding in reverse and am pleased to discover that I have a faint recollection that there's a different step that has to go in subtraction. I try again, pulling the pencil from my mouth to scrub the eraser over one incorrect question before starting it all over, thinking through each step carefully. Ending up with the same answer, I finally have to admit that I'm stumped.

"Mom, I don't get this," I call louder than I need to as she is standing just on the other side of the room, earning myself a glare from my brother who is working through one of the more advanced books. "I'm doing it wrong but I can't remember what part is wrong."

"Okay, just a second," she glances over with a nod while she finishes cutting a carrot before walking over, wiping her hands on a tea towel on her way. "Let's see," she swings the book so the page faces her. "Oh look, you took one away from the tens column to make the three bigger but you turned it into four instead of thirteen," she points to the second question, the first one I'd circled as incorrect.

I look at where she's pointing but don't understand, "What?"

She sits on the chair and holds her hand out for my pencil, "I'll show you."

She walks me through the question, correcting my 'reverse carry over' mistakes and explaining the principles behind the process, drawing small circles around the different columns of numbers and labelling them 'ones', 'tens', and 'hundreds'. When it finally 'clicks' and I see

what she's trying to tell me I can't help but bounce up and down on my heels that are still tucked underneath me,

“Okay, okay, I get it now,” I laugh and playfully push her hands off the book, snatching my pencil back. She smiles and returns to her cutting board while I redo the questions I got wrong.

I check the answers again, satisfied to find they are mostly correct, aside from a few basic subtraction errors that I quickly fix. Having had enough of the math I lift myself up to stand on the bench, relishing the satisfying sting of pulling my skin away from the vinyl where it was stuck, and stretch my legs with a shake before jumping to the floor and heading down to the rec room to see what Joe is watching on TV.

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“Mandy!” my mom calls from the front door. I vaguely realize this is the latest in several similar salutations and lift my head from the worn paperback tucked into my lap. “We’re going now.”

For a moment I am confused but then as the world of *The Babysitters Club* and the angst-ridden trials and tribulations of its prepubescent members fades away like mist burning off in the sun, I come back to my own nine-year-old life and remember that we’re going swimming this afternoon. I remain folded into the chair for a long moment, my head resting on one arm, my legs thrown over the other, a browning apple core resting forgotten between two sticky fingers. I am frustrated by the interruption and anxious to see just how the girls will resolve their current conflict. And then, as the reality of the book continues to fade I realize my legs are stiff and my

feet are going numb from hanging over the edge of the chair for so long. I feel a twinge of despair as I set the book aside, careful to prop it open to my current place, and swing my legs down, pulling myself up from the soft embrace of the brown and orange and cream flowers that are smeared across the velour fabric of my favourite chair. I automatically smooth a hand over the material where my head was resting on it, erasing the marks I made by pushing the pile in the wrong direction.

My mom's head appears over the half-wall that separates the living room from the front hall, half a floor below,

“Let's go, hon, everyone else is waiting.”

Images of splashing water and the thrill of the waterside at the local community centre replace the emptiness that suddenly opened at the loss of my book-world and I'm up off the couch and darting across the room. The book will be there when I get home and while I'm happy to change gears for a while, part of my attention will remain with the characters and their lives until I return to them to finish the story.

“I don't know how you can read those books,” my older brother scoffs once I am finally buckled into my seat and we are backing out of the driveway. As one of the few of us who don't get carsick, I'm in my usual spot in the very backseat of the station wagon facing the wrong way as we pull away from the house. His voice drifts over my head and I feel a clutch of guilt as I watch the house grow smaller and smaller as we drive away.

I shrug, “I dunno.” I usually just don't respond and pretend not to hear his criticism of my reading tastes.

“They're just so repetitive and shallow,” he says, “I'd feel like I'm wasting my time reading them.” In my head the sophistication and knowingness in his mature eleven-year-old-

certainty automatically out trumps my own enjoyment and I don't know what to say. I know he's not trying to be mean but I feel hurt anyway. I want to only like 'good' books and see what he sees in these 'bad' ones but I don't and I can't. I fall into the story and get lost there, regardless of writing style or quality. I don't even see it as one or the other. Some stories are more interesting or more boring to me at any given time but that's my only criteria. Do I feel like reading this? Am I enjoying reading it? Do I want to continue reading it? These questions direct my choices and motivate my selections at the library every two weeks. I wish I could be clever like him and see the difference between these books but I honestly don't. Well that's not true, I know that when I read *Lord of the Flies* I could feel a difference, I had to think more about the book and what the characters were doing, or wanted to be doing, that it was more complex, but that doesn't mean I don't still enjoy the *Babysitters' Club* too.

And yet, I can't shake the feeling like I'm missing something, that I shouldn't be enjoying these books as much as I do. Part of me is angry at him over that and part of me appreciates that he's trying to teach me something, grateful that I have him to point out the differences and make me think about what I'm reading and why I'm reading it. And when it comes right down to it, I'm just happy as long as I'm reading something and I don't have to be picky, so in some ways I think I'm better off than he is because reading for me is this wonderful thing that includes so many kinds of books without being disappointed by them or feeling like I'm wasting my time. Reading is never a waste of time for me.

My brother has long since moved on to a discussion with my cousin speculating about whether or not the slide will be open at the pool and I am happy to sit quietly still clinging to the remnants of that lovely lost-in-a-book feeling as the car carries me gently away and back into the real world.

We go to the library every two weeks or so and my mom has instituted a strict policy of everyone writing down their books (or asking her to write them down) as soon as we get home to avoid lost items and mounting fines. I never leave the library without a pile of books literally filling my arms, revelling in their weight as I make my way to the car, careful to keep them tucked in line lest they start to slip and start an avalanche. I collect my choices carefully, reading the back of paperbacks to see what kind of story they tell, sometimes including old friends with new risks just to be sure I have something I'm going to like. Running out of books I want to read before our next trip to the library is always a worry but with a solid collection of favourites at home on the bookcase I know I can always fill the gap with something.

I've met a few kids who say they hate books and I am literally astounded by this declaration. I can empathetically comprehend the idea that some kids might not like reading to themselves, just as I don't like playing football or road hockey, but to say you don't like books, that sounds as ridiculous as saying you don't like food. With the variety and range of topics, forms and styles out there, their vehement dislike makes no sense to me at all.

When asked about my favourite activity I don't usually think of reading because I don't see it as 'an activity'; to me, it isn't something I choose to do, like drawing or riding my bike. Reading is just something I've always done, it's part of my daily life. I can't remember ever not being able to read and trace my fascination with books back through my favourite story of my two-year-old-self somehow discovering a collection of books-of-the-movie based on classic horror films at the library and making my mom sign them out and read them to me over and over. Years later, as a teenager, I was delighted to discover that I still knew entire scenes off by heart, purely based on the repeated readings of these books as a child, evidence of how deeply I engrossed myself in their tales. I have always loved to hear my mom tell the story of those

books, eventually with my footnote about the movies themselves, because it is part of my life with books, part of the narrative of my relationship with the written word; it confirms not only my love of horror and supernatural fiction but, more importantly, my identity as a life-long book lover, someone who picks what she wants to read and then goes ahead and falls in love with the story it contains.

## **Monopoly**

Uhg, I think to myself.

I'm about ten, sitting on the newly installed linoleum of the family room. A board, plastic playing pieces and messy piles of paper money and square cards of paper cover the coffee table in front of me. I am growing increasingly bored and frustrated as I listen to the boys negotiate a deal,

“Yes, but if I give you Marvin Gardens you'll have all three which is much more dangerous to me, and therefore more helpful to you, than me just having two of the red properties and the one blue one.”

“But you're getting two properties out of it.”

“I know but the one you're getting is more useful than the two you're offering.”

“So what else do you want?”

“You could throw in your railroad too.”

“No way, then you'd have two.”

“Fine, how about some cash too?”

I fiddle with my plastic houses, stacking them and then flicking them gently with my finger until they fall down.

“Does anyone else want to make a fair trade?” one of the boys asks, his voice sharp with anger over the negotiation that just failed.

“No, just take your turn,” I snap.

“I will, I’m just trying to see if anyone else wants to trade anything.”

I roll my eyes. This game is killing me.

“You didn’t have to play,” he accuses me, picking up the dice to roll.

He’s right. I didn’t have to but they begged me and since the rest of them were, I’d have been bored and alone all afternoon if I didn’t. He rolls and completes his turn. My feet have gone to sleep under me and I shift out of my kneeling position, stretching them out beside the table and enjoying the pins and needles that flood into the tissue as the blood returns. I glance over at my cousin, the banker,

“How many properties are left?” I ask hopefully.

“Uhm,” she counts quickly, “five. No, Baltic too, six.”

I nod happily.

“The game doesn’t end when they’re all bought,” my brother points out.

“What? When does it end?” This game has already lasted for an eternity and I can’t bear the idea of playing any longer than I have to.

“When everybody except one person goes bankrupt.”

“So when we’re all out of money?”

“Yes, and also have sold all your houses and hotels and mortgaged all your properties.”

I stare in dismay at the board, the colourful property labels, the scattering of green houses and red hotels. I can’t even begin to fathom how long this game will last. We have been playing forever already and we all still have quite a bit of money left. Plus, every time someone lands on

your property they have to give you some of their money and then when you land on theirs you give them some back.

This will never end.

I feel a pressure building in my chest as my brother squints at me doubtfully, “You said you wanted to play and we said we were playing until the end.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know you meant that long,” I whine. I see where this is going and know he’s getting frustrated with me. I look at the stacks of ‘deed’ cards carefully arranged in front of him. He plans on playing until he’s won. All I want to do is be released, to stand up and walk away from my stiff legs, my boredom and, now, my anxiety over wanting to quit. My chest is tight and I have to remind myself to force a deep breath in and out. My jaw clenches.

“You can’t quit,” he says, clearly waiting for me to disagree and touch a spark to his smouldering temper.

I can’t keep playing. I know I’m going to have to quit, “No, I don’t want to play. This is dumb and boring,” I snap, standing up to distance myself from my decision.

He yells for my mom and I yell back at him, loud and angry words fly back and forth. I cry. He doesn’t. I’ve let him down and feel very badly about that but didn’t know how to avoid it. He wants hours and hours more from me and I couldn’t keep playing. He refuses to understand my point and I cannot see his anger as justified or understandable given his investment and expectations for the game. The others support him and it’s just me walking away feeling small and somehow lessened but also firm in my knowledge that I didn’t want to play and couldn’t have continued playing for as long as they expected me to do so.

Faintly, I wish I was someone who could have finished, wish I was like them, but I’m not. I’m someone who... I don’t know. I just couldn’t do it and didn’t really care that much that



he was going to get mad. No, I cared that he got mad but I didn't care enough not to quit; my frustration and stress over trying to keep playing when I couldn't stand it, when they spent so much time arguing and negotiating, was too much. The idea of playing any longer pressed in on me, my chest was growing heavier and heavier with each round of turns that was taken, the tension building in my gut. I couldn't do it. And he got mad.

And to this day they make fun of me for 'always quitting' when no one seems able to cite any specific instance other than that one game.

## **Bigger Projects**

The three of us sit huddled over the massive book.

"When shall we three meet again," my cousin reads slowly.

"In thunder, lightning or in rain?" her brother answers.

"It will be 'ere the set of sun," I chime in, delighting in the trip of the words on my tongue, the foreign phrasing and cadence of the sentences.

"What's a greymalkin?" Joe asks, looking ahead to his next line.

"Um," Sharon places a finger on the small number next to the word in the line and traced a path to the corresponding number in the notes cramped along the outside of the page, "it's a cat, I guess."

"The cat's name or a kind of cat?"

I lean across him to look at the tiny print of the margin notes, "Well, it says 'paddock' in the next line is a toad and that they're the witches' familiars so I think they're names."

Joe nods but still looks confused.

“Familiars are witches’ pets,” John chimes in from where he’s sitting at the dining room table sketching out plans for the stage. “But they have some power, so not just pets. It depends on what you read but the idea is that witches had animal companions that were linked to their magic in some way.”

“Oh, okay,” Joe nods and turns back to the page.

In my mind I can picture the scene, three old hags dressed in tattered scraps of dark and filthy cloth, standing around a steaming cauldron on a rain slashed heath. I’m not exactly sure what a heath actually is but feel like it’s some kind of barren and desolate field, the perfect place for three witches to meet and plot the hero’s downfall (at least, I’m pretty sure that’s what they are doing). In my mind’s eye I didn’t see the three of us dressed in torn sheets with scraggly wigs and wrinkles drawn on with greasepaint standing in front of a painted drape made to look like a field; I see the witches, calling out their words of power against the wind and the rain and the fog that would most certainly be snaking around our ankles; I see a glimpse of someone else’s vision of the magic and mystery that could be a part of our world; I see an echo of the magic and fantasies that dance around my dreams, spelled out by someone hundreds of years before me; I see a kinship between my love of everything monstrous and magical and this play, *A Classic*, that rolls out in a rhythm and rhyme that drips off my tongue so that I feel I almost know what word should come next to satisfy the dance as it unfolds.

Later, John reads us the synopsis and I am slightly disappointed that the witches didn’t figure more prominently in the action but am still delighted by the rest of the dark and gloomy story, not to mention the ghost and the murderous plots and the awkward poetry that trips up my tongue while it seeps into my soul.

Learning that first scene by heart I fell in love with the words first and then with the whole play, and the author himself, as the idea of witches and magic and poetry and murder slowly filtered into my understanding as well. This Shakespeare fellow, with his delicious poetry, was incredible. My heart connecting to not only the dark content but also the epic and classic feeling of the characters and plot. It reminds me of my book of Greek myths or my illustrated Children's Bible, both collections of stories I adored because they spoke to me of other people's most basic beliefs, a foundation for all the other stories I read. Shakespeare's work echoed that feeling but added poetry and mystery, and death and ghosts. In short, I am in a young book nerd's heaven.

Eventually we grow tired of trying to memorize lines and the immensity of the undertaking becomes real, resulting in a drifting away from the project but to this day I still remember that first scene and the thrill I felt over discovering the magic of Shakespeare.

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Another larger activity I remember doing around this time in my childhood was a wildlife 'class' with a partner of one of my mom's friends. Bill came every week or so for a while and ran little seminars on animals, environmentalism and various other topics. We had a set of resources that I think we got in the mail (we got a lot of textbook and other school material samples as a result of my mom officially registering us as a private school) that included info sheets and animal profiles featuring a wide range of endangered and threatened species (hello, 1980's environmental movement). I remember Bill talking to us about habitats, how specific animals required specific features in their living spaces, and other rudimentary biology. What stands out

in my mind was that we each had a project to do one week: to study a particular endangered animal and report back on it for the next session.

It's funny, as I started to write this section I thought the one thing I remembered from these 'classes' was my animal but as I wrote that last paragraph I realize that I was thinking of my sister's animal, the sea otter. My report was actually on arctic caribou and to this day I remember that one of the things threatening them was oil pipelines being built across their terrain, disrupting their migration patterns. I don't remember what we did with these reports but I remember us all taking it pretty seriously, colouring in printed pictures and have a vague recollection of building some kind of diorama of my animal's habitat.

The 'animal class' with Bill stands out to me as one time at this age in which I had 'homework' to do but I don't remember it being a stress or a pressure, largely probably because we didn't actually have to do it. If we wanted to be included in the report giving portion of the next session, we obviously had to have a report to give, but this was a natural, logical consequence of the organized learning environment, and each of our individual decisions to participate was still completely self-directed. I remember enjoying this class very much but that it only lasted a few weeks, I'm not sure why. I can't say now what would have happened had it continued, had we done it every week. Would my interest have remained? Would it have become something we had to do and therefore something we dreaded or resisted?

### **Camp and Swimming Lessons**

While the majority of my time was spent in the unstructured homeschooling environment, I did attend other activities that were highly structured. Most prominent in my memories of these activities are swimming lessons and summer camps. In this stage of my life I

attended several different day camps and was enrolled in swimming lessons from the time I was about six until I was thirteen. While my experience of swimming lessons was almost always a positive one, my experiences of the structure of summer camps varied depending on how the structure was maintained or enforced.

“Okay gang,” the instructor smiled down at us, “everyone line up, we’re going to swim laps and work on our front crawl.”

We follow him to the end of the pool and stand shivering in line. A slow stream of water runs out the end of my braid to tickle its way down the small of my back. I shift from side to side, relishing how slippery the smooth tile feels under my wet feet. The air is sharp with chlorine and I find it hard to pay attention as the shouts and whistles from the other groups echo through the space. The pool is tucked away in the basement of a small private school and I love that it feels almost like a cave with its low ceiling and close, tiled walls.

“Remember what we talked about last week,” my instructor raises his voice over the kids who are chatting at the end of the line. He bends over and mimes the overhead reach of the front crawl stroke, “Breathe on the same side, every other stroke. And don’t forget to keep those legs straight when you’re kicking.” He nods at the first kid in line, “Okay, go ahead, Sarah. Everyone else, when the kid in front of you passes the second ladder you can get in the water.”

After only a minute or two I’m at the front of the line and the kid in front of me pushes off the wall with a choppy swing of her arms. When she passes the ladder I slip into the warm water gratefully, holding onto the edge of the pool briefly before pushing off to stroke my way to the shallow end. Popping up as my hand grazes the rough finish of the edge of the pool, I rub the burn of the chlorinated water out of my eyes before hauling myself out of the water.

We repeat this exercise, swimming back and forth across the length of the pool, a couple more times before the instructor calls out that we're all to get in the water in the deep end, "But everyone stays on the wall until I say they can come off, got it?" We nod before collectively darting forward to the rounded edge of the pool deck. "Careful, no pushing," He calls and we slow down, milling about until we each find an empty space on the wall and slip back into the water.

The instructor takes off his red and white mesh tank top emblazoned with what I think is an unnecessary label of 'LIFEGUARD' printed across the front, and jumps into the water beside us. He swims out to the middle of the pool and calls us, one at a time, to join him and practice treading water, something we just learned for the first time last week. Waiting for my turn I watch the others as they head out into the deep water and thrash about for their twenty seconds or so. The instructor watches each kid carefully but I notice that he keeps an eye on the rest of us too, scanning the line every so often. Finally, everyone is done and he tells us to swim to the shallow end. I duck underwater and swim as far as I can before my bursting lungs force me up for air. I know now that what I do is called the breaststroke but to me it's really still just how I swim. I can't remember ever not swimming and my mom tells me that we had a small pool in the backyard when I was a baby so I figure that I must have learned to swim when I learned to walk, which I cannot remember not being able to do either.

We get to the shallow end and our instructor is looking back towards the deep end with a smile on his face. I follow his gaze and see my cousin, Joe, still hanging off the side of the pool talking to one of the girls in the class. The instructor holds a finger to his lips, and we wait silently for a minute or so. Finally, the girl looks up and is surprised to see that the rest of the class is no longer on the wall behind my cousin. She grins bashfully when the instructor waves

for them to join us. Once the whole group is together the instructor teases Joe and the girl briefly before turning serious, “I was watching you guys this time so it was okay but you have to pay attention,” he says, looking from one to the other, “there are other classes doing stuff and the water is deep there, you have to listen and you have to be safe.” They both nod seriously and he smiles before he turns to address the entire class, “Okay, cool. Let’s play frozen tag, anyone who touches the bottom of the pool is frozen whether they’ve been caught or not. On the whistle, Joe, you’re it.”

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“If you guys don’t stop throwing those at each other I’m going to take away everyone’s mirrors and we’ll just sit and do nothing until lunch,” my counsellor yells at the three boys who are throwing their small mirrors at each other like ninja stars. “I told you the edges might be sharp, you have to be careful,” she admonishes.

The boys stop briefly but when her back is turned while she talks to another camper they start up again. I was worried at first but after looking at my mirror I see no sharp edge and my concern for their safety turns into mild confusion as they refuse to listen to the counsellor and follow her instructions to use the mirrors only to look at the underside of leaves and branches.

“Come on, guys,” I can hear her frustration rising, “it’s pretty neat how different things look on the underside, just give it a try.”

Eventually the boys participate half-heartedly and our group moves on. At lunch, however, they continue horsing around and get yelled at by a different counsellor who marches

them off to meet with the director. At the end of the day we are all sat down on the picnic tables in the lunch area and the director addresses the entire camp,

“Okay, everyone listen up. I’ve been told that some of you are playing around near the electric fence over by the pasture,” he swept his hand out to jab at the wire fencing that separates a field from the open space where we played games all afternoon. “You’ve been warned about the fence and you need to stay away from it. Last summer a kid touched it when it was live and he was sent flying ten feet.”

I can’t believe how calmly he is talking about this. Well, no, he’s clearly frustrated and angry with us but he doesn’t sound worried or even that concerned about our safety. The sun is beating down on my neck and I wonder absently if I will end up sunburnt again. The director turns a glaring eye through the crowd and when his eyes lock on mine I want to burst into tears. He is angry at all of us even though most of us have been listening quietly and have stayed well away from the fence after his first warning given that morning when we got off the bus.

“I mean it, you guys stay away from that fence. We try to remember to turn it off before you get here every morning but if we forget and you touch it you could get seriously hurt.”

When I relate this story to my mom over dinner I try to explain my confusion over his anger and the situation as a whole, “I just don’t understand, why do they have that at a camp? If a kid could get hurt, it seems like a bad idea and I’m not sure why he was mad at us, them forgetting to turn it off is what would cause a problem.”

“I don’t know honey, maybe he was trying to scare kids away from playing near the fence.”



My throat constricts and it suddenly hurts to swallow, “It was kind of scary, the way he was so mad at all of us even though I never did anything. And what if they forget to turn off the fence? Someone could get really hurt.”

In the end my mom talks to the camp and after they respond with less than supportive answers I decide not to go back to finish the session.

A few weeks later I’m in another day camp and we’re at the Science Centre for a field trip.

“How are you kids this week?” I overhear another counsellor ask my leader, Billy, while we mill around the group entrance that is teeming with kids in colour coded t-shirts, leaders and counsellors standing up out the throng like solitary trees planted here and there in a sea of shifting grass.

“They’re pretty nuts,” Billy laughs. “Except this one,” he points at me and smiles, “she’s my angel.”

At first I feel a flash of pride at his praise but following that is discomfort that I don’t fully understand. I don’t try to ‘be good’, in fact that’s a phrase that has never been part of my lived vocabulary at home. Neither of my parents have ever admonished me to ‘be good’ or scolded me for ‘being bad’. They’ve always said there’s no such thing as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ behaviour, just doing what’s right, and being kind and respectful and that kind of thing. I follow the rules because Billy is fair and the rules make sense to me: you have to be quiet when other people are speaking in a large group or no one will hear anyone, and you have to clean up a mess because someone else will want to use that space. Listening to the counsellors and doing what they say is important because if I don’t I won’t be able to do any of the activities they are leading and, in some cases, could end up hurt if I ignore rules established for safety reasons. I don’t

‘behave’ because I want Billy to like me or because I have to, nor do I do it because I have any desire to ‘behave’, I do what I do because it makes sense to me and is the best way to enjoy myself at camp. If I didn’t want to listen to the counsellors or do what they said, I wouldn’t be there. So I listen and follow the rules but I’m still uncomfortable with being labeled an angel, even if, at nine-years-old I don’t fully understand that discomfort.

## **Tree Climbing**

When I cast my thoughts back to my homeschooling experiences, one episode kept coming to mind. At first I kept dismissing it as it wasn’t directly linked to schoolwork or structured/unstructured environments but after I started to trust in my gut and follow this story where my subconscious took it, I understood its place. The following story looms large in my mind when I think about homeschooling and after writing it for this project, I’ve finally learned why that is: it sums up much of my early experience and while it did literally happen it also offers a lovely metaphor that beautifully illustrates how my mom’s trust and belief in my capacity to learn undergirded everything I did back then and subsequently, to some extent anyway, everything I have done since.

I am probably about seven or eight years old and I have climbed higher in the maple tree in our front yard than I ever have before. The climb up was glorious, the bark beneath my hands always surprisingly smooth compared to other trees, its small bumps and edges tickling my palms rather than scratching against them, my bare feet sure on the branches as I reach up and pull myself higher and higher. I had considered stopping in the crook where I like to sit and read because it makes me feel like a character out of an old book. It’s a terrible reading place.

Contrary to the romantic ideas in my head, it is actually very uncomfortable to sit on the narrow branch and I can never fully concentrate on the story as the hard wood digs into my behind and I have to remember not to lean back lest I lose my balance and fall out of the tree entirely, betraying my mother's unwavering trust that I will be safe in my climbing. I have thought about bringing some kind of pillow up with me but even though I can't say why, I don't bother to think it through that carefully, I think my mom would probably say it wasn't safe. Plus, that would be cheating on the 'I'm Anne Shirley/Huck Finn/Jo March perched in a tree reading' purpose of the exercise, which is the only reason I really do it in the first place. I've always been kind of disappointed by how uncomfortable it is but continue to do it, nonetheless, the discomfort of its actual experience easily outweighed by the enjoyment of the idea of it.

But today, bookless and without any kind of plan in mind, I scrambled past that spot, looking only further up as my hands moved from branch to branch almost of their own accord, guiding me higher and higher until I reached the spot where the thick limbs began to thin out and I dared not go any higher, and paused to look around. I don't remember deciding to climb this high but it's so cool to look out through the fresh spring buds and see the neighbours' houses from a different perspective. I'm almost even with the bedroom windows across the street but it's mid-morning on a weekday so the entire house is dark and closed up, as are all the other houses on the street, I think to myself. We are the only ones home during the week and I am the only one up here in the tree. I lean forward, my chest against the limb I'm holding, always careful to keep a firm grip with both hands. The breeze moves in through the branches and the slight swaying of the limb under my feet is exciting, just shy of frightening. The freshness of the warm spring air is still novel after a long winter and I eagerly suck in the scents of earth and green and growth.

Eventually my feet start to ache from the narrow band of pressure of the limb beneath them and I decide I've had enough of looking at the world. I want to climb down now but a sudden flash of panic rips through me as I look down, despite the clear admonition in my head that You Should Never Look Down in a situation like this. And now I know why. My mind empties as I look down through the cross-hatching of branches that my brain can't even begin to process into anything offering any kind of support or path safely back to the large rock sitting at the base of the tree trunk exactly one million miles below my suddenly much more precarious perch. Each limb represents not a step in my path back to safety but a weapon, something else for me to break against in my long tumble down to a painful demise. My hands turn into death-grip vices that will never ever let go of the limb that stretches comfortingly just past my chest. I lean into it, wanting to close my eyes but not daring to do anything that might in any way make me more vulnerable up here.

I want off the tree. I want to be on the ground.

I know nothing else in this moment.

I hear someone, a couple of the other kids, come out the front door and dash away behind the bushes to run along the front of the house.

"Hey," I yell, twitching my grip tighter as the expansion required to shout presses my chest back off the limb just slightly, "Guys!"

I hear them tramping back around the front of the bushes towards my tree.

"What?" my cousin yells, squinting up at me.

I don't want to admit it, don't want the tears in my throat to rise up with a request for help. I don't want to be stuck here. I don't want to have climbed so high I can't get myself down. I want to get down.

“I can’t get down,” I finally yell back, feeling my heart deflate as I say it, disappointment seeping in as I realize for the first time that this is actually true. Until now all I knew was the empty panic of only the distance between me and the safety of the ground. Talking to them I suddenly see that my real problem is that I don’t know how to climb back down, regardless of how terrifying the prospect is and how far away the ground now feels. Climbing up you just reach and step, reach and step, with your eyes on where you’re going, the next branch, the next step. Going back down you can’t see the next step, have no idea where to put your foot and have to lower yourself, something somehow much more terrifying and dangerous than pulling up, feeling blindly for a branch that may or may not even be there.

There is no way I could climb down this tree; that is simply not possible.

Eventually my mom is there, standing at the bottom of the tree looking up at me. Suddenly the ground isn’t so far away and I’m not about to plunge to my excruciatingly painful death.

“Yes you can,” she calls up calmly, “if you found a way up you can find a way down.”

I hate it when she says that. I forget that in the past she’s always been right and feel only a spark of anger at the fact that she doesn’t believe me when I say I can’t. I have no thought for the fact that she has no other option in this matter, that there is no way she can come get me and carry me down the tree. All I know is that she believes I can do it but I know I cannot.

I’m crying a little and am old enough to be faintly embarrassed by that fact but still young enough not to really care about being embarrassed.

I argue with her briefly, maintaining my position that climbing down is in fact an absolute impossibility and that she just, literally, can’t see that from where she is standing. She continues to smile up at me gently, validating my fear but reassuring me that if I climbed up it has to be

physically possible for me to reverse my steps and climb back down on my own. The fear has wrapped around my chest, constricting and twisting against my heart and lungs, making it hard to believe her but I do. I always do.

“Just turn around. Hang on and be careful but turn yourself around so you’re facing the trunk,” she instructs.

“I can’t,” I yell back.

“Yes you can,” I can hear her smiling up at me in encouragement.

I take a deep breath and the fear loosens a little. I tighten my grip with my right hand, the bark biting gently into my fingers, and let go with my left. My heart is hammering in my chest and I forget to breathe past the weight of terror that squeezes between my lungs and my ribs. I reach out and touch the trunk, hoping desperately the wind doesn’t suddenly pick up and toss the tree into a heaving disarray. It complies and everything is still.

I lean over, wrap my arm around the trunk and my mom yells up at me with gusto,

“That’s it, way to go! Now just lower yourself down a bit, there’s another branch under the one you’re on.”

I slide my right hand closer to the trunk and feel my skin catch and sting where the stubble of the bark digs in and tears under the tension of the grip I refuse to lessen. I start to reach down with my foot but find nothing. There’s nothing there, she’s crazy.

“It’s lower down, you have to reach lower,” her voice calls up. “You can do this, you’re okay. Just hold on and bend your other knee.”

I try again, bending my right knee and reaching down with my left foot. I reach and reach, my leg stretching down miles and miles below me, I’m shaking and could fall at any moment and I there is no way I can reach the branch she sees and will never get down after all.

“Honey, you have to bend your knee more,” she calls up.

I look down at my knee that must be bent almost in half, I’m so unsteady and have reached so far with my other foot.

It’s barely bent at all.

“You can do this, it’s only a couple inches. I know it seems far but you can reach it, it’s not as far as it feels. You’re okay, you can do this,” she reminds me. The absolute assurance in her voice, the absolute faith she has in my ability to climb down, is a fact, something real and true and despite my fear and surety that I will fall and die right here and now. Somehow while being absolutely certain I’m about to fall and die I have also have believed in her belief all along; on one hand I know I can’t but on the other, she knows I can so I guess I can.

I try again, squeezing my eyes shut as my arms tremble under the strain of my fierce grip.

“A little more, that’s it, just a bit further. You’re halfway there, almost, yes!”

After the empty terror of nothing but air I suddenly scrape the tip of my big toe against something and before I can even open my eyes my foot is steady on the branch and I’m stepping my right leg down to join it.

“See? There you go! Just a few more like that,” my mom calls up and I can hear her smiling at me again.

We repeat this process and it gets slightly easier with each branch but my heart remains firmly lodged in my throat, pumping there harder and faster than I thought possible, the whole way down. My mom keeps up a steady stream of encouragement even when I’ve reached my normal climbing range. My hands and arms are shaking and even that familiar territory feels dangerous and fearful after my recent brush with death and new understanding of the mortal dangers of tree climbing. My mom keeps up the encouragement but lets me finish on my own,

hanging from the last limb to finally let go and let myself drop the foot or so to the packed earth beneath the tree.

I turn away from the once-friend who has betrayed me so deeply, angry and hurt and still scared, to see her there, her head cocked to one side, smiling at me with such pride and happiness I feel the icy grip of fear and anger melt away under its warmth. She gives me a hug and I press into her softness as I had pressed into the solidity of the tree. She runs a hand up and down my back and squeezes my shoulder comfortingly,

“If you can find a way up you can find your way back down,” she says. I still kind of hate hearing that but with this recent affirmation in its claims I hate it a little less.

A few years later I will come to understand that what I hated about it was the fact that it meant I had to find my own way back down, that she was not coming to get me; that I had to solve my own problem. And more than a few years after that I realized that this was actually never the case. She didn't climb up that tree to get me and pluck me away from my fear, saving me from having to deal with it myself, but she didn't leave me to solve the problem alone. She was there, directing me, encouraging me and believing in me the whole way down.

### ***Growing Up (Junior High School)***

We moved an hour and a half west to Kitchener when I was about ten and I remember this 'era' of being one where I started to think about my place in the world around me in a different light. Within the municipal population we were still within the dominant group (i.e. white and middle class (Statistics Canada, 1995)) but I was becoming more and more aware of how 'weird' our lives were compared to my peers with regard to how many people lived in our house, our relationships with the adults in the family (more egalitarian and less rule-oriented),



and our daily lives (from homeschooling to no bedtimes or chores). I started to see our 'otherness' and understand just how strange other people saw our lives.

In particular interest to this paper, I gained a more distinct perspective on our schooling, or lack thereof, and how other people saw it, how different it really was from what they expected, and started thinking about my future and what that difference might mean down the road.

"What school do you go to?" asks the blonde boy, bounce-passing me the ball we're sharing as we shoot warm-up shots waiting for the coach to whistle us into the middle of the court.

"Uhm, I don't go to school," I don't mumble it but I want to. I want to ignore his question and not have to throw up the big 'we're-a-weird-hippy-family-that-does-everything-differently' flag that I know will put a distance between us.

I shoot the ball, barely even noticing it swoop through the net.

"What do you mean, you don't go to school?" he glares at me incredulously as I collect the ball and pass it back to him.

I shrug, here we go, "I'm homeschooled." I wait. How is he going to react? Is he the friendly but curious and disbelieving type? Or the angry, full of judgement and inexplicable accusation, type?

"You go to school at home?" I can't tell what he thinks yet. He shoots and misses.

"Yup," I scoop up the ball as it bounces towards me and shoot again. This time I miss.

"You sit in desks and do school at home?"

“No,” I shake my head, collecting the ball and dribbling a few times before passing it to him, still trying to size up his reaction. I sigh inwardly and take the plunge, “We just do what we want.”

“You do whatever you want all day? How do you even learn anything?” and there it is in his sharp tone and knitted eyebrows, the anger, the source of which at this point I have yet to understand.

“We learn lots of things,” now I am mumbling, shooting a sidelong look at the coach where he stands talking to one of the dads. I wish desperately that he’d blow his stupid whistle and end this conversation before I have to clearly demarcate the line between my life and this boy’s.

“Well, do you know your times-tables?” he asks, holding the ball in front of his chest like he’s going to pass it to me but making no move to do so.

“Some of them,” I shrug again, hoping he can’t see the lie in my eyes. I don’t know my times-tables, not off by heart. I understand and enjoy multiplication but have never put much time nor energy into memorizing them like my cousin has. I know this is something kids are Supposed To Know, but I don’t. And I don’t think this kid is going to be interested in my thoughts, built from various conversations overheard between my mom and her friends, on why times-tables aren’t really all that necessary or why half of what they have to do in school isn’t actually important.

“What’s six times seven?” my teammate demands, bouncing the ball at me harder than he needs to in order to complete the pass across the short span of gym floor between us,

My stomach is churning as the ball smacks into my hands, stinging faintly against my palms.

I turn to the basket, reaching the tips of my fingers into one of the seams, just like my brother taught me to, the dimples reassuringly familiar against my skin. I breathe out as I pull the ball close, one hand on the side to stabilize it, and jump to flick it off my fingers in the seam, relishing the smooth release that sends it rotating neatly into the air, spinning off the square target on the backboard and directly through the hoop. I love that feeling.

“Well? Don’t you know?”

I ignore the question, retrieve the ball and pass it to him, wishing I could stop myself from throwing it as hard as I do.

He stares at me before taking his shot. The ball falls straight through the hoop,

“Nothing but net,” he cries, pumping his fist. I smile at him but the tension sits heavily in my gut.

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Around this time, perhaps because of my age and awareness of the looming future or because of this increased social awareness or a combination of these and other factors, I also remember feeling pressure to do more ‘school work’. I don’t remember this pressure coming from any of the adults in the house or from my dad and stepmom, it was more of an internal stress and worry that was certainly fed by my older cousin’s desire to do more work. She’d always seemed to think doing concrete academics like math worksheets was important but as we got older I remember experiencing a distinct feeling of guilt that I did not do as much work as she did.

I did it sometimes and enjoyed the math itself but hated the pressure I felt when I thought about doing, or not doing, ‘work’. Pretty much the only actual ‘curriculum’ that I remember us having at this stage were three sample math textbooks we’d received, grade six, seven and eight in the ‘Mathquest’ series, the re-emergence of which I was to find comfortingly familiar when I started high school in grade nine. My cousin worked through all three, from start to finish, doing almost every single question in them, if my memory serves correctly. I don’t think that at the time she believed that school kids rarely did everything in a textbook, even though I’m pretty sure my mom and/or aunt pointed that fact out at least once or twice.

“What do you want to do this morning?” I ask Sharon, my older cousin, as we dig the last few bites of cereal out of the puddles of milk at the bottom of our bowls.

She shrugs “I’m going to do math this morning. You could too.”

My heart sinks as thoughts of roaming through the neighbourhood park, or playing a computer game, fade.

“If we do a few hours this morning we can have the rest of the day to play,” she points out practically.

I nod slowly. I don’t want to do math. It’s not that I hate it, it’s just boring to sit with those books and do question after question. Sharon’s way of doing the books means starting at page one of a chapter, reading the text and then doing every, or at least every other, question on every page until you reach the end. I much prefer my mom’s way of doing it, finding a section that looks interesting and working through a few questions until you know how to solve whatever kind of problem it is they’re focusing on.

“You can’t just do the parts you like,” Sharon had explained when we first received the books and she starting working through them cover to cover.

“Why not?”

“Because then you won’t know it,” she shook her head at the obvious answer to my question.

“But why does that matter?”

“Because math is important. You have to know this stuff.”

“But my mom said we don’t have to do it if we don’t want to.”

“You don’t have to, but” she shrugged her shoulders, “math is important and if you want to go to school eventually you’ll have to know how to do it.” There wasn’t a personal threat undercutting her words but the suggestion of certain doom if one didn’t understand Math before starting school.

And so on that morning, like so many other mornings, I sat with her at the kitchen table in front of my book and a small stack of loose-leaf lined paper and worked my way through a couple of pages in what felt like an eternity before abandoning the work to join the boys in a water fight outside.

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\*Flashing forward three years or so\*

“Mom,” I call without looking up from my binder where I am labelling my homework sheet just as my math teacher taught us on the first day of classes back in September: with my name, class, date, and the corresponding textbook page written as neatly as I could manage in the top right-hand corner of the lined page, “we have to do long division with this stuff we learned in math today and I forget how to do it, can you come here?”

“Just a second,” comes the reply from the laundry room. A minute later I hear the machine start to whir and she emerges, coming to join me at the dining room table, “What was that?”

“We have to do long division for these problems and I only kind of remember how to do it.”

“Oh, okay. No problem. Let me turn on the oven for dinner then I’ll come show you.”

Fifteen minutes later we’ve worked through several different problems, discussed the location of decimal points and agreed upon the fact that learning my times tables would have made the process easier but was not actually absolutely necessary.

“Okay, do this one on your own now while I put the chicken in,” she hands me a scrap page torn free from my binder where we’ve been reviewing the process.

I work through the problem and quickly declare that I’m done. She checks my work with a smile,

“You’ve got the process down, you just messed up the math here,” she says pointing to a three, “What should that be?”

I look over the page again, “Four?”

She smiles at me, “Yup, you got it kiddo.”

I nod, “Okay, cool.” I chuckle and add, “now I just have to do the rest of my homework.”

Going back to the textbook I scan over the list of questions I need to complete and absently notice that the small knot that had been sitting at the pit of my stomach all day has loosened. The quiet dread had crept in that afternoon as my math teacher ran through the long division quickly and without any discussion in order to get back to the real work we were supposed to be focusing on for class. He clearly expected us all to be able to do it ourselves and I'd felt a quiet shame shift and settle in my gut when I realized I couldn't quite remember all the steps after he'd finished his demonstration. Bolstered by my recent re-mastery of the process, however, I launch into my homework and complete it quickly, vaguely noting a slight smugness that I re-learned it so quickly and hadn't had to waste the countless hours on drills and activities my public-schooled peers had probably been subjected to when learning long division in whatever grade it was they originally taught it.

### **'Extracurricular' Activities**

While I had participated in various community leisure programs and classes over the years, at this age, between ten and twelve or so, I was able to think about that participation and reflect on my enjoyment more distinctly (directly related, I suppose to my cognitive and emotional development). My memories of these activities, and my response to them, therefore, include a deeper understanding of how I felt and what I really thought about them, offering interesting material for the purposes of this study.

My siblings and I were always involved in various programs at local recreation facilities ranging from art classes and sports to summer camps. My perspective on these activities was one of general enjoyment but I was definitely more interested in the arts than the sports. Somehow, however, I seem to recall participating in more sports programs, but I can't remember why that

is. Maybe they were more available? More affordable? Something my siblings were more interested in and therefore more present in my understanding of my options? For whatever reason, sports played a significant role in my ‘extracurricular’ activities as a child.

To contextualize these experiences, it may help you to know that in the late 80’s/early 90’s as a girl I felt fully supported in my engagement with sports. In the era that followed the social changes of the 1960’s, in the generation of kids born to those who had watched athletes like Billy Jean King and Martina Navratilova present a different kind of female athleticism, I never felt any pressures to be more ‘ladylike’ or any resentment over my male peers having more support in their athletics as did preceding generations (Lenskyj, 1987; Mrozek, 1987); my dad bought me a baseball glove and broke it in just like he did my brother’s, I played on the same fields with the same equipment as the boys and don’t remember any serious discrepancies between activities offered to either gender. While participation in sports may still not have been in equal proportions at the time (Smoll, Magill, & Ash, 1988), I don’t remember encountering any distinct discrimination or inequality.

To me, girls playing sports was not an anomaly but in fact a natural given, something I ‘should’ be doing (even though I have no memory of anyone ever telling me so explicitly). This internalized perspective on the benefits of sport perhaps were a result of the burgeoning values of that era surrounding the ‘active-lifestyle’ and importance of physical activity (Festle, 1996) or the growing focus on other benefits for girls now able to participate more freely in sport (American Association for Health and Recreation, 1973). The significance here, however, is that I was part of the first generation of girls to experience this freedom and lack of constraint surrounding my leisure choices, something I didn’t see as significant at the time because its



significance lay in the absence of discrimination and inequity, of which I had no real understanding.

All of that being said, however, I was always more interested in the arts programs than their athletic equivalents.

The middle school cafeteria/gymnasium/auditorium is quiet. Our drama teacher has turned down the main lights so all we have are the limited stage lights shining on the small stage that runs along one side of the room. The rest of the class are all sitting on the folding bench/table combinations that are currently arranged in long rows, filling the long room.

I kneel on the stage silently, my hands clasped in front of my chest, my head slightly bowed. I mouth nonsense words subtly and focus on who I am and my deep sense of faith and peace despite the horrors of what is about to happen to me. My knees ache from this short time of kneeling on the hardwood and I build that into who I am, what I am doing: I will continue to kneel and pray until they come to take me away, no matter how much it hurts, that is how strong my faith is, that is how little I care for my physical body.

I keep both my impending death and my perfect faith and trust in mind as I let my gaze rise up and, without seeing them, over my friends in the audience to carry my prayers of hope and protection to the heavenly father with whom I, Joan, have such a close communion. Relishing the idea of this kind of faith, I let go into religious expression never a part of my real life. I gaze upward knowing that Joan is about to be released from the pains of this world and be rewarded with life eternal in the next, near-silently whispering the words of the Lords Prayer, vaguely noting in the back of my mind that I'm not sure exactly how or when I learned them.

I know my scene is coming to an end so before I even think it through myself, wanting to avoid looking rehearsed, I jerk and stare offstage to my right, imagining the slap of fear that would accompany the sound of your executioner's arrival no matter how deeply your faith ran. I blink and turn back to the audience, looking down at the edge of the stage while I cross myself hurriedly, kissing my hand to my lips and closing my eyes for a long pause.

I jerk my arm up and away from me as if it has been grabbed and rise stiffly to my feet. My arm jerks again, someone pulling me a half step forward, but I yank it back, looking at my invisible jailor with a self-righteous dismissal. I square my shoulders and take a deep breath, wrapping one hand around a crucifix I do not have hanging around my neck, and with that Joan of Arc walks out of her cell to meet her doom.

I stand blinking in the wings of the stage for a moment. The room is silent and as my thoughts return, as I step back from Joan, a thrill of excitement races through me. I walk back out onto the stage amid applause from my classmates and jump off the stage to re-join the group. Steve praises my performance and talks again about acting without words and points to specific gestures in my performance as well as the timing as a way to build intensity. I don't really remember doing what he mentions, a small shake of my head, a pause between standing and walking off stage, but I accept his praise with an embarrassed smile.

I didn't do those things intentionally, I didn't plan them out; they were just part of what happened, part of the entire experience I walked through in my head. In this way, acting to me is just like reading: I get to slip into someone else's life for a while and walk around in their shoes. And I love it. I've always been fascinated by other people's experiences, how they live their lives, how their lives differ from mine, and this drama class has let me do so in a whole new way. I'm looking forward to our final performance and have been pouring over my lines every day,

reading them silently and letting the scene play out in my imagination over and over again. I'm normally opposed to anything involving rote memory and have actually been surprised by the fact that I don't mind working on my lines. I fully expected to hate that part of acting but since it's a necessary evil for this project, I'm actually quite happy to do it.

In direct contrast to my unadulterated enjoyment of drama, my participation in sports never inspired that kind of passion or personal engagement.

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"Let's go, Muffin," my mom calls again, "I have your glove and hat."

I race down the stairs and follow her out to the car. It's getting near the end of the season and everyone on the team is excited about the upcoming final league tournament but in the back of my mind I'm kind of hoping we don't make it very far.

I stare out the window as we drive, answering my mom's direct questions but otherwise not saying much. This game is like every other for me and I sit biting my nails with the usual mild twinge of sports-anxiety twisting around the gobbled dinner that sits heavily in my stomach.

Once we get to the diamond I stand around awkwardly until one of the other girls asks me to warm up with her. We toss a softball back and forth and the ever-present tension I've been ignoring loosens a little. I love the sound of the ball snapping into my glove and the satisfied thump it makes against my hand when it lands perfectly in the pocket my dad worked into the soft leather.

I smile at my teammate and we vary our throws, tossing grounders and pop-flies to each other while we wait for the coach to call us in.

“Let’s have fun out there and play some heads up ball,” my coach cheers at the end of his pre-game pep-talk before listing off the positions we’ll all be playing in the first inning. I’m on second base. When asked what we wanted to play I said I liked being catcher but, in truth, it kind of terrifies me. All the positions do, though, so I just named the one that looked like it might be fun too.

I like the mechanics of baseball a lot, the hitting, the catching, throwing out a runner, but when I played soccer I didn’t feel like I stood out as much, I was just one of many kids on the field chasing the ball. In baseball, however, when the ball comes flying at me it was up to me to catch it or drop it and I am keenly aware that either outcome was blatantly obvious to all watching.

I make it through the inning without missing much. I even catch a grounder and make the play to put a batter out at first but each and every time the ball comes to me, or I can see a runner at first ready to sprint towards my base the second she can, my stomach clenches and my shoulders tighten up.

Halfway through the third inning and I’m behind the plate, squatting uncomfortably in my pads. No matter how many times my coach reminds me that the pads will protect me I still flinch when the pitch goes wild and I have to deal with the ball coming at me in from an unexpected direction. I never noticed before but the swing of the bat feels especially close to my head as I squat behind the batters so I back up a little. After a few batters, however, the umpire taps me on the shoulder and I turn to look up at him through the cage of my facemask.

“If you back up any further, girl, I’m going to have to stand in front of you,” he jokes.

He’s looking down at me with a kind smile but I’m gutted, sure that everyone heard him even though he kept his voice low. I turn back to the plate and mumble an apology as I shuffle

forward into what I'm sure is lethal range of the aluminum bat that is about to be swung at a hundred kilometres an hour.

The game finishes and we won. I celebrate with my teammates but don't really share their exuberance. I had an okay time, I made some plays and didn't mess up anything too important but that's about all I can say for the experience.

"Did you have fun?" my mom asks as we walk back to where the car is parked in the elementary school parking lot.

"Sure," I shrug.

"That was a great hit you got, that double," she smiles warmly at me.

"Thanks."

Sometimes I wish that I liked sports more, that I understood what everyone else is talking about in terms of enjoying a game and how good it is for kids to play but I don't. It's not just the worry about being hurt or messing up, a lot of it is that I get kind of bored and just don't really see the point but it is what it is and so I show up and play even though I'd really rather be at home reading my book.

Sports are something to do, something good to do, something that I somehow should be doing, so I told my mom to sign me up for baseball this year, instead of soccer, hoping I'd enjoy it more. It's a bit better in some ways but I still don't see what the big fuss is about sports. I don't mind it too much, though, so I'll probably play again next year.

## **Computer Games**

"Come on, it's my turn," my brother John pleads behind me.

“Not yet, I still have ten minutes in my hour,” I protest, not looking away from the screen where I guide Sir Grahame through the wilds of Daventry, “that’s the rule.” I know he knows the rule, just as I know that he knows I still have time left on the clock.

“You won’t be able to finish this part in ten minutes,” he complains.

“You don’t know that, we don’t know how to get to past the leprechaun guards so I could still figure it out.”

I don’t really think I’ll be able to solve this latest puzzle in the game within the next ten minutes but there’s no way I’m going to admit that and give up my last chance. We’ve been stuck on this part of the storyline for the past two days and it’s driving me crazy.

He sighs, “Fine, did you check the cave again? Maybe there’s something in there?”

“You said that already and I did, there was nothing there,” I snap. A frenetic energy has been building in me the entire time I’ve been playing, the entire time I’ve spent wandering around aimlessly hoping to find something to shed light on how to overcome this obstacle, and I can feel my temper ready to snap free if my brother tries to rush me off the computer once more.

“Jeez, you don’t need to be mean about it, it was just a suggestion.”

“Yeah, well you’ve been ‘making suggestions’ my whole turn and none of them have helped.”

“I didn’t know they wouldn’t help, did I? As you said, we don’t know what the solution is so it could be anything that we haven’t tried yet.”

I breeze the hero’s avatar through screen after screen of scenery hoping to spot something, some little wink of colour to signify an object we haven’t seen, or any other sign of what we’re missing. The tension in me builds as I know the clock is winding down. I don’t even really care if I find the solution on my turn or if John does it on his, I just want us to solve it so

we can move on. I hate not knowing the answer, it reminds me of when I've lost something and can't find it anywhere no matter where I look. I assume we'll figure it out eventually but not knowing when that will be, not knowing how to get there from where we are stuck, it makes me feel trapped and agitated.

The timer on the stove finally buzzes and I change positions with my brother even as my mom calls down that my turn is over. I watch him wander around much as I did and after ten minutes or so get bored,

"Maybe we should call Sean and ask him," I suggest, hating to admit defeat but desperate to resolve the problem.

John doesn't answer right away, I can tell he's weighing the option so I keep quiet, knowing that he's more likely to agree if he comes to it on his own.

"Maybe, but we have to ask the others first," he says hesitantly, turning away from the game, "my turn is on pause while we go talk to them, though."

"Totally."

We troop upstairs from the den to the kitchen,

"Mom, can you pause my turn?" John asks, "We're going to ask the other kids if it's okay if we call Sean and find out how to get past this part in King's Quest."

"You guys are still stuck on that thing with the guards?" she asks, dumping a pile of diced peppers into a large pot on the stove. I listen to them sizzle and breath deeply to suck in the scent of the onions and ground beef already browning in the pot. "I'm sure you'll figure it out, you don't need to just ask Sean for the answer."

She never says the word ‘cheating’ but I know that asking for the solution is just that. I knew she’d disapprove of us calling him and feel slightly embarrassed to have brought it up but my frustration with the game outweighs everything else and quickly shoves them out of focus.

“It’s so frustrating,” I whine, still hoping to get her approval before we move ahead, “and last time we got this stuck it was that stupid thing with the eagle-”

“-Condor,” my brother corrects.

“Whatever. We thought it was impossible but we just weren’t in the exact right spot for him to grab us. What if this one is like that, something stupid we think we’ve tried but it’s just really finicky about how you do it.” The words tumble out in a rush and I feel better having vented my anger at the game’s previous tricks.

My mom smiles sympathetically, “I know it’s frustrating, hon, and you guys can call Sean if you want to but I think you’ll be happier if you beat the game without his help.”

My brother looks at me and I know from the determination in his face that he’s changed his mind.

“Fine,” I huff, angry at no one in particular. No one other than the game itself, that is. “You go take your turn, call me if you figure it out.”

My brother darts back down the stairs and I turn towards the living room to seek solace in one of the three books I have currently on the go.

“Do you want me to turn the timer back on for John’s turn?” my mom calls at my retreating back.

“No, that’s okay, I don’t want to play anymore today,” I reply as I sink into my favourite chair with a sigh. Moments later I’m lost in the story and all thoughts of the game, the puzzle,



and my frustration have drifted away, left behind when I slid unawares into a different fantasy realm to follow the life of a different hero.

### ***The Ending of an Era (Grade 8)***

When I was twelve we moved again, this time to a large hobby farm just outside Waterloo.

The basement of the farmhouse was a central location for our activities during my last stage of homeschooling. The old half-sized pool table had been converted into a permanent space for a medieval Lego village and was tucked up against one wall where our structures and the social world we created around them were always accessible and yet not in the way of any other activity. When Lego building wore thin or we were fed up with each other's vision of how the village should be run, we converted the mismatched collection of old couches and armchairs abandoned to the basement into forts and shields for Nerf battles and various other sneaking and strategizing games often played in the dark to add an additional thrill.

When we weren't playing in the basement we spread out all over the large house and yard, playing in the pool or on the trampoline, rolling down the large hill in the front yard safely tucked inside a pair of large inner tubes, or scattered in any one of the more quiet spots in the house reading, working on math books or doing any number of craft activities. Like my memories of the house we lived in when we first moved to Kitchener, this 'era' doesn't hold a lot of specific memories for me but looking back I remember loving having all the people around to talk to and play with and enjoying the space of our yard which was several acres large and included a large aluminum barn mostly filled with tools and storage but still offered alternative space for games, adventures and handiwork. I remember the freedom was the same as it always

had been and yet at this age it had begun to feel somehow different than it had when I was younger.

My older siblings went to public high school just after we moved and I remember being somewhat surprised by this development. I wasn't shocked or disappointed, it just hadn't really occurred to me that anything would change, that they'd be old enough for high school and that it was something about which we'd all have to make our individual decisions.

I, however, continued to be homeschooled with my two younger siblings and an additional group of cousins who were several years younger. As the oldest child in the house during the day I remember being somewhat bored and feeling antsy and frustrated by the lack of age-peers to play with and, as a result of this, ended up starting high-school technically a year early the following September (my birthday is in early January so while by birthdate I was a year younger, it was really only a matter of weeks). I know that my mom never said I had to go to high school but I also don't remember actually actively making the choice to do so, it was just what you did and since I was bored at home it made sense that I should go to school as soon as possible. Even in that life where we were allowed to do whatever we wished, I somehow ended up following a current that pulled me into the mainstream without even really knowing what was happening.

My friends who went to school were becoming more sceptical and more vocal about their disbelief in our way of life and with the idea of high school looming in my near future I was also quite preoccupied with what that change would mean for my life. I watched my two older siblings go to school, come home to do homework, or not do it as they chose, make friends and generally do 'normal' teenage things. This appealed to me, not only because I think part of me always wondered what 'normal' life was like but also because everything I saw and read made it

seem exciting and different from everything I knew. I wasn't envious of 'normal' kids, nor did I wish I hadn't been homeschooled, I've just always been interested in other peoples' lives, how their lives were different from mine and what it would feel like to be someone else, doing completely different things in my everyday life.

That last year of homeschooling was spent with a lot more reading, some more structured work in math to help prepare for high school and a lot of playing with/minding the younger children, which I enjoyed a great deal. Having worked with kids in some capacity my entire life, I remember this period 'on the farm' being when I first felt like I was really looking after the younger kids, old enough to understand their developmental processes and fascinated by their different abilities, personalities and perspectives on the world.

After reading so much about other homeschoolers during the course of my graduate studies, part of me wishes I had done more with this time, pursued my creative interests and invested my time in other activities rather than reading and playing games at home. And yet, again, that wasn't something I thought to do. I did do a great many things including 'extra-curricular' activities like fencing and drama, helping to cook for the family, knitting and other handicrafts, but looking back there is a part of me that wishes I had committed to something like learning an instrument or language or pursuing a passion like drawing more specifically. This isn't a regret linked directly to homeschooling, however, and I know a lot of my friends have expressed similar thoughts regarding their childhoods but given my degree of freedom and choice, I can't help but think I could have done so much more with that time.

Even as I wrote that last sentence, however, the leisure scholar in me cringed. There were times when I felt under challenged and ready for something new but, by and large, I was happy and enjoyed my life on the farm and yet, here I sit, over twenty years later, wishing I'd been

more 'productive' with that time, without really thinking about what that would have meant, how that would have changed my life and how I would have had to change in order for that to happen; I didn't ask to do more activities and so for me to say I wish I had means I'm also wishing to have been someone different, someone more driven and less focused on the smaller, immediate, day-to-day pleasures of the life I was living at the time. I think it's important to note, however, that my retrospective wish that I'd 'done more' as a kid is a separate, albeit related, issue from the angst and boredom I felt that last year at home. Yes, it would great now to have over thirty years experience in a hobby or skill that I current wish I had but, more important to this paper is the fact that as a 'tween' at the time I enjoyed my freedom and yet yearned for some larger projects to occupy my growing capabilities and interests as I moved beyond being content just playing games or running around.

## **The Kids**

"Here," my cousin Patty says, nestling her newborn son gently into the crook of my arm, "I'll be quick in the shower but if he wakes up and starts crying just come get me."

I stare down at the swaddled infant, relishing the weight of him and how perfectly he fits snuggled against my chest. I had meant to grab my book before taking over baby-holding duty but all thoughts of boredom and wishing for a distraction flee from my mind as he squirms slightly, his lips parting as he breathes softly and I watch his eyes move under the closed lids.

I can remember the day his brother was born several years ago, I was struck by my first real awareness of a new life, a whole new person in my life, another cousin to play with, to know and to include in our wide and wild family configuration. But this baby, this baby I have known

personally since only a few hours after his birth, this baby I am old enough to hold on my own, to watch over not as a peer but as An-Almost-Adult.

I stare down at his peaceful face, his flat little newborn nose and dark eyelashes, and let my imagination dance out across the years, marvelling at the incredible life this little person will one day lead. I feel a particular familiar shiver of excitement run up and down my spine. I get this feeling when I think about what my mom calls ‘big picture’ things like my little place in this immense world, all the infinitesimal coincidences that had to come together across centuries to make my life what it is, or even just thinking about everyone else who can see the exact same points of light in the night sky that I’m looking at when I lie out on the trampoline at night and marvel at all the stars I can see out here in the country. Like a warm soft wave of energy I can feel it building in my chest as I look down at the tiny little fragile bundle in my arms and as I think about all that lies ahead for him, it releases and races out through my limbs with a delicious trill.

An explosion of shrieks and chatter bursts into the room as the baby’s older siblings rush in, buffeted along by a stiff October breeze that tosses a few dried leaves in behind them before they snap the door shut.

“Shhhh,” I admonish, nodding my head down at the baby in my arms.

They silence immediately, still in awe of the novelty of the new little one in the house, and tiptoe across the room to clamber in around me on the beat up old couch.

“Be careful up there. Don’t fall on me,” I say to the four-year-old big brother who has stationed himself on the back of the couch, leaning down to coo at the baby.

“I won’t,” he whispers loudly in my ear.

“Can I hold him next?” one of the girls asks. Her cheeks are pink from running outside and I can smell the fall air still clinging to her copper-coloured hair as she leans in front of me to blow kisses at the sleeping boy.

“I’m just holding him until your mom is done in the shower, you can ask her about holding him then.”

I’m proud of my authority, glad I thought to say no because it proves I am thinking of the safety of the baby and because it cements my role, separating me from them, the ‘little kids’. The moment passes and the kids drift away one by one to find something more exciting to do than watching a baby sleep. As much as I liked having them here, being in charge of them around the baby, I am happy to once again be alone with him in our little bubble.

### ***‘Normal’ School (Grades 9-OAC)***

I don’t think it would be a surprise to anyone when I say that starting high school when I was thirteen was one of the most significant changes in my young life. Adjusting to the collection of little things like having to get up in the morning, picking out an outfit from my small collection of ‘school clothes’, or waiting until a designated period to eat, meant no small change in and of itself but the bigger picture impact was something I didn’t really understand until after I’d been in school for a few years. It wasn’t until I got my feet under me and had the mental energy to stop and look around that I really gained perspective on school, before that I was too busy just trying to keep up and figure out just what the heck I was supposed to be doing to pay much attention to anything beyond my daily routines.

Enrolled in a mainstream public high school program the year behind my brother and older cousin, our school was located in a downtown area with students coming from a wide range of neighbourhoods or choosing the school for specific programs (i.e. work-skill focused

special education, ESL, French immersion) resulting in a relatively diverse population in many ways. While I was unable to find any specific statistics on student demographics of the school looking through my yearbooks my memories are corroborated in that it appears that the large student body (1647 students according to my grade nine yearbook) was predominantly white, despite the relatively large ESL program, while the entire faculty and staff were also white, with the exception of one black teacher joining the staff (of over 150) in my final years at the school. My understanding of the general reputation for the school, however, was one of acceptance and less 'cliqueiness' than other area schools with a high rate of upper-year transfer students who repeatedly told the rest of us that we were lucky to have been there all along, that it was much a more relaxed social environment with 'a group for everyone', allowing all students to feel they belong somewhere and relatively little friction between groups. And while I know all of this material is anecdotal here, it reflects my memory of the school, my understanding of the broader sociocultural context within which I saw my school experience playing out.

I adapted to the academic demands quickly enough to earn decent marks and maintain a higher than class average in most of my courses throughout my time at the school, but that doesn't mean that it wasn't a struggle; over the course of my five years in high school (Ontario had OAC or 'grade 13' at the time) the biggest challenge I had was in adjusting to the power dynamics and the lack of control I felt over my daily life and finding my way through a new social world built around a very distinct hierarchical power structure. As a leisure scholar who has spent so much time exploring the impact of control, choice and self-determination in activity, this struggle, and its impact on my lived experience in this environment, is something that I found particularly interesting. Working through the wide range of memories of those times I

found that the individual events that felt significant to this project loosely fell into the groupings you'll find below, leading you through the story of my life in high school.

## Teachers

“Yes, uh, Laura?” Mr. T nods at the girl next to me who raised her hand a few moments ago.

Raising one's hand to speak was still a novelty to me and I loved the feeling of tradition and formality of it; I caught myself before smiling at my partner, excited to just be part of the class, part of School.

“May I please go to the washroom?”

“Class just started, you should have gone before the bell.”

The look of surprise on her face mirrors the jolt I feel at his dismissive and frustrated tone.

“But,” she falters, “I, uh, have to go now.”

“It's first period,” he snaps, “and there's no reason you can't go before the bell. I'm tired of you guys interrupting class, wasting time and going out to wander the halls instead of doing work in here.” He turns back to the blackboard and continues going over the steps for today's lab work.

I'm gutted. I've only been spoken to in that kind of angry, derogatory and authoritarian manner a handful of times in my entire life. I can't believe he just spoke to us like that and it doesn't occur to me to ignore it or dismiss it as his bad mood or even to realize he isn't speaking to me personally; he is upset with the entire class, and ergo, me, even though I have done nothing wrong and I am hurt by it. Anger and fear swirl through me as I sneak a look at my desk-mate



out of the corner of my eye. She's blinking rapidly, looking down at her notes. I remain silent and pray that I don't need to use the washroom until the period is over.

When I get home that afternoon I tell my mom about the incident and her reaction eases the tension I've been carrying in my gut all day.

"He's not allowed to do that," she says firmly before going to call the school.

The next day my teacher and I have an awkward conversation after class in which he says that if we need to use the washroom we, of course, always have that right but that it is still our responsibility to go before the bell and not disrupt or lose class time if we can help it. I remember distinctly noting that while he officially went back on his no-bathroom-breaks-in-first-period-stance from the day before, he never really admitted to being wrong. Nor did he say anything about the tone of his voice or his attitude towards the class, which was actually what I was most upset about, not to mention the fact that my lab partner had not actually be given permission to go and had been forced to wait until the period ended.

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My grade ten English class experience starts with a small group of students milling around in a hallway trying to figure out where classroom 024 is actually located.

"But all these rooms are 100's," a boy I don't know points out, gesturing to the small plastic placard inscribed with a room number screwed into the wall next to a classroom door.

"So then where are the zero rooms?" I challenge, pointing to my timetable that I've checked and re-checked a dozen times in the past fifteen minutes as I wandered around looking for the mysterious classroom.

“Maybe it’s a typo on all our schedules?” someone else suggests.

All of a sudden all of my, literally, sophomore confidence has vanished and I’m feeling small and lost once again. I glance at the clock on the wall. We’re going to be late if we don’t find it soon. I don’t know Mr. W and have no idea how he’ll react if half the class is late on the first day. Tension is coiling in my gut. I should have started looking sooner. I should have gone straight to the office and asked but it’s too late now, by the time I get up there the bell will have rung and I’ll be In Trouble. Whatever that actually means.

The door at the end of the hallway swings open and a tall man with a bushy moustache stands in the doorway smiling. His standard white dress shirt has an unexpected print of pen tops over the pocket and a fake ink stain at its bottom, its irreverence strikes a chord and I feel some of my tension release before he even speaks,

“You guys looking for room 24?” he asks as if he already knows the answer.

We nod collectively.

“This way,” he waves for us to follow him.

We glance at each other. The doorway he is standing in leads to the small vestibule between the hallway and the outside door leading to the back parking lot. Where is this room?

He waves again, stepping back, and we follow him to find a small wooden door tucked under the staircase in the vestibule. I enter the school through this hallway every morning and yet I never noticed that door before. He leads the way down a set of narrow stairs to a small hallway,

“That,” he turns to face us and points to our right, “is the old rifle range but now it’s basically just storage.” He turns his back to the storage area and invites us into the classroom opposite it with another sweep of his long arm.

We file in and shuffle to find empty seats in the slightly cramped room. The ceiling is low and feels even lower when Mr. W, who must be over six feet, strides in to stand behind his desk with the ceiling starting a only a handful of inches above his head.

“Welcome to the dungeon,” he says with a grin, “I’m Mr. W and you’re here for grade ten advanced English. Or at least, I hope you are. If you’re looking for the auto shop and you haven’t figured out that you’re in the wrong place yet, well then I’m sorry but you have been seriously misinformed as to what goes on in auto classes.”

We chuckle as we unpack our binders and pencil cases.

As the semester winds on English quickly becomes one of my favourite classes, a pleasant surprise after the disappointment I felt last year when somehow Mrs. K managed to take most of the fun out of reading even for me. I still enjoyed much of the class, thrilled by the chance to talk in that kind of depth about books and excited by the introduction of new ways to think and talk about what I’ve read. Themes, climaxes, symbolism, these were not entirely new concepts to me but being assigned specific tasks and asked to answer her questions made me stop and reflect upon what I read in a way just chatting with my siblings or friends or even with my mom never had.

I had quickly learned, however, that there most certainly was such a thing as a stupid question and wrong answer in her class. She wasn’t overtly mean or dismissive but the way she pursed her lips after some kids answered her questions, I could tell she wasn’t impressed with them and as the semester had worn on it became clear that too many strikes meant she expected less and was quicker to get frustrated with students who gave those kinds of answers. As a student who rarely earned her disappointed looks I had been keenly aware of the tension in those who did and found myself always second-guessing my answers before raising my hand,

conscious of my place of privilege and not wanting to jeopardize that position if I could at all avoid it.

Mrs. K's attitude towards students aside, I had also been somewhat disappointed by the work we were expected to do for the class. While I enjoyed the idea of discussing what we read and appreciated the new tools I had added to my repertoire, expanding my capacity to do so, I had been frustrated by most of the assignments and class work as it appeared to be more important to just prove we'd read the material than to think about it on our own. By halfway through the semester, knowing how I would be expected to engage with the books in class, I found myself dreading doing my English reading, the concept of which, me dreading reading, was so strange it took me until the next year to fully understand the impact her teaching had on my enjoyment.

In Mr. W's class, not only did that tension about being one of the 'good students' never develop, but he also obviously appreciated creative engagement and encouraged us to work with the material at a deeper level than simply answering straightforward questions about content and basic literary forms and processes; he had high expectations for his students and would clearly point out our mistakes but it never became personal and in class discussions he asked what we felt and personally thought about what we were reading, not just about what the climax was or for a list of symbols used by the author to build an argument regarding the theme(s) of the book. It was this personal side, the fact that that he appreciated our opinions and believed we were capable of doing our own work, of contributing interesting material to the discussions that created the more individualized atmosphere in the class: he respected us as individuals and we, in turn, responded as such.

“Mr. W, it’s so nice out, can we work outside today?” one of my classmates asks, clearly joking and expecting his request to be denied.

Mr. W looks up from his desk. He squints momentarily, clearly weighing the question, glancing out the sunken window, craning his neck slightly to catch a glimpse of the sky beyond the concrete and metal rails of the window well.

“Sure,” he shrugs, “but only one group,” he held up one finger for emphasis, “we can take turns different days.”

The boy blinks in surprise, “Uh, okay, cool. Can we,” he glances at the ladder built into the concrete of the window well, “use the fire escape?”

Mr. W laughs good-naturedly, “nice try but don’t push your luck. You guys can go out the back door but stay in sight, I’ll come up and check on you in a little while.”

We all watched as the boy’s group gathers their books and troops out of the room laughing and joking. Mr. W calls out after them, “don’t make me regret this, I expect you guys to have the best answers by the time you come back down.”

The boy who asked is the last to file out the door. “Sure thing, Mr. W. Thanks!” he calls over his shoulder as he darts up the stairs.

At the end of the class, Mr. W brings the outdoor group back inside and hands back our creative writing assignment. I feel a clutch of tension in my chest when I see the stack of papers on his desk. I’ve never written a complete story like this before and am nervous to see what he says about my work. I rise and walk to the front of the room when he says my name, thanking him as I take my assignment and scurry out of class, not looking at the red marks on the page until I’m back at my locker, alone and anonymous in the crush of between-class hallway traffic.

This assignment had completely freaked me out at first when he said all we had to do was write a mystery story. We'd just finished reading Sherlock Holmes when he said it was to be our creative writing component for the year. I don't think we even had a creative writing component last year and I was instantly excited and nervous about this new assignment. Finding out that he had no other serious outlines other than a rough guideline for length and expectations for grammar and style, I started to panic. When I got my chance to sit with him one-on-one and talk about my outline, I was finally able to convey this concern to him and was relieved to hear him actually say that he wasn't looking for anything in particular other than creativity and clear writing. His confidence in my writing skills and genuine enthusiasm over my plot outline, not to mention the fact that he said he couldn't wait to read my final story, also helped me relax into the work and I went home that night and wrote the entire thing in one sitting, wrapped up in the joy of the words and playing out the story in my head.

I turn the papers over in my hands and look at the messy red scrawl on the back page. He liked. That is the first thing I realize as I decipher his handwriting and I squeeze the happy joy of that fact close as I toss the paper on the shelf of my locker to look at more closely later, not caring to look at the scribbled grade at the bottom of the page.

The next week Mr. W starts class rubbing his hands together gleefully, "Today we start with Shakespeare," he exclaims. His enthusiasm is met with stifled groans that only fuel his exuberance, "what? No, you don't hate Shakespeare," he says, with mock derision sweeping aside our protestation with both hands, "Shakespeare is awesome. Shakespeare is the man. If you think you don't like Shakespeare you just haven't done Shakespeare with me yet. If you know your Shakespeare you can do things like turn to your wife on the morning after your wedding and say," he mimes lying in bed with an arm tucked behind his head, turns his side and smiles

before softly reciting “ ‘Shall I compare you to a Summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.’<sup>6</sup> ” He drops his arm with another grin and a wink, “trust me, guys, she’s going to love that. Or how about when you want to get someone fired up.” His voice rings out suddenly in powerful tones, “‘Once more unto the breach, dear friends once more! Or close the wall up with our English dead. In peace there’s nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility: but when the blast of war blows in our ears’,” he strides forward, beseeching us with his hands as his voice rises to a full call to arms, “‘then imitate the action of the tiger!’<sup>7</sup> ”

The class chuckles over his dramatic delivery as a few people clap and cheer and he takes a sweeping bow, “Seriously, guys, this stuff is awesome. Dig out your books and lets get started.”

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Sitting on the steps of the auditorium in the main hall, I looked up from my homework to find my friend, Holly, standing in front of me.

“What are you doing here, don’t you have history?”

She shrugs and drops to lounge on the step below the one I currently occupy “Meh, it’s a work period for our papers that are due this week. I’m ‘in the library’,” she smirks as she uses her fingers for quotation marks.

I chuckle, happily setting aside my physics book. We sit and chat for a few minutes before being joined by a handful of other friends who have a spare period.

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6 Shakespeare, W. *Sonnet 18*. This source retrieved online October 1, 2014 from <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/Poetry/sonnet.XVIII.html>.

7 Shakespeare, W. *Henry V*, (act IV, Scene i). This source retrieved online October 1, 2014 from <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/henryv/full.html.0>

“Oh shit,” Holly straightens up mid sentence, interrupting the treatise she was giving on the merits of vampire movies in our social consciousness. I follow her gaze and feel my own stomach tighten as her history teacher makes his way up the main staircase not twenty feet from where we are sitting.

“Uh, hi Mr. M,” she says with a small wave.

“Hey Holly,” he returns the wave, “just checking to make sure you guys were all still around.”

“Yeah, I uhm, I’m on my way…” her awkward opening to a stammered excuse is cut off with a wave of his hand.

“Don’t worry about it, I know you’ll hand in your paper on Friday,” he says with friendly smile as he makes a small wave of farewell and walks on towards the library.

Holly looks at me and we stare at each other for a moment before relaxing into laughter.

“And that,” she points in the direction of his receding back, “is what I love about history class.”

“That you get out of working?” I tease.

“No, dummy, the fact that Mr. M so cool. Did Joe tell you what Mrs. B said yesterday?”

“No,” I shake my head, “he went out with his friends after school I didn’t see him at home last night.”

“Well,” she turns to address the entire audience of friends and acquaintances lounging around on the steps, “Amy’s cousin, Joe, is in my English class. Mrs. L got sick so we have this new teacher, Mrs. B and she’s… uhg. So we had a working period and she said a bunch of us could go to the library to work but when we started packing up our bags she got mad and said we had to leave them in the classroom. So Joe, smartass that he is, muttered,” she pauses for



dramatic affect, “‘I find the lack of trust in this room is sickening’. And she heard him.” Holly’s laughter derails the narrative for a moment and we all join her. I can picture my cousin muttering something like that, just loud enough for everyone to hear. Our shared love of sarcasm and similar dry sense of humour gives the two of us no end of amusement when we’re together, and causes our family no end of annoyance when we get going.

“And she heard him,” Holly swallows her laughter with a gasp, “but this is the best part, she said to him ‘it’s not that I don’t trust you, I just think you’ll leave’.”

The ridiculous statement has me laughing again.

“He just stared at her, and we all tried not to laugh. I mean, she’s an English teacher, doesn’t she know what trust means?”

“So, did he leave his bag?” I ask as my laughter winds down, replaced by the dull ache of frustration I barely even register any more.

Holly shrugged, “she said he could take it in the end but reminded us we had to check in before the end of the period or we’d be marked absent for the whole class.”

I shake my head in disbelief and pick up my physics book once again, making a token attempt to work through at least one more problem before the bell rings.

## **Homework**

Adjusting to school was one thing, getting used to having homework to do every night was an entirely other matter. Eventually I got used to it but for most of grade nine found it incredibly stressful.

“Arg,” I run my fingers into my hair and clench them against the roots, “I hate this.”

“What are you working on?” my mom calls from the kitchen.

“Latin. Stupid derivatives, I hate spelling.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine if you get it close enough.”

“No, that doesn’t count,” I huff, “we get one mark if we get it perfect, nothing if we get anything wrong.” I am mortified to realize there are tears simmering under the surface of my frustration.

“Do you want my help?” my mom sticks her head around the corner.

“No,” I mumble, “there’s nothing you can do, I just can’t spell. I hate this.”

“I thought you liked Latin?” my mom sits down across the table from me, craning her neck to look at the pages in my binder.

“I do but there’s always so much homework.”

“I don’t remember John and Sharon having that much to do when they took it last year.”

“Well, I guess they’re just a lot smarter than me,” I hate the petulant whine in my voice but it makes me feel better to snap at her.

“Oh come on, Honey,” she chides me gently and I’m grateful that she’s ignoring my attitude, “you’ve been at it for a while, maybe you just need a break?”

“No, I have to get it done. My science stuff took forever because I had to read a bunch and then answer all the questions and finish the lab report and I still have three chapters to read for English. And I haven’t even started studying for my geography test on Friday.” The tears well up and I swallow hard, forcing them back down past the lump in my throat.

“You’ve got lots of time to study and I’m sure you know most of it already,” she comes around the table to rub a soothing hand across my shoulders. I lean into her and take a deep breath. “Show me the words you’re having trouble with.”

I point out the four words in the list that I can't seem to ever remember how to spell and she sits with me drilling through them until I have them down.

"See? That wasn't so hard. What do you have to do next?"

"English and geography," I pout, glancing over my shoulder to where my younger siblings and cousins are laughing at a movie in the living room.

"Well, you know, you don't have to do any of it," she says gently, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

"God mom, yes I do. Stop saying that."

"Well you don't, though. It's up to you if you want to do it or not."

"Okay, sure, you're right. I can drop out of high school and just never go back because I don't want to do some English reading and study my geography," the sarcasm vents a little more of my frustration as I belittle her point, "that's a good idea."

"Well, yes, you can drop out if you want to but you could also do the reading before bed or get up early and do it in the morning and you can study in your spare period tomorrow," she points out patiently.

I groan, "No, I can't. I'll fall asleep or not get up in time and I only have half a spare because of Latin." I know she's just trying to help but it's only making it worse because I'm still stuck with this mountain of work that I'll never get done; nothing she can say will make it go away so her suggestions feel like they're trivializing how hard it is and how frustrated I am. I can feel the panic building in my chest, tomorrow I'll only get more work assigned to me and then soon I'll have to start studying for my first ever set of exams. A terrifying thought. After I write the exams, however, I'll have a week off before my next semester starts, a whole week with no school and no homework. I'm so excited about that week that I almost can't think about it. I

almost can't believe that it's possible, for all this to be done and for me to be free of the constant pressure in my chest, the ever-present weight of Homework pressing in on me.

“Okay, well then why don't you go read in the family room and see what you can get done in the next half hour? What are you reading?”

“Cue for Treason,” I mutter.

“One of your favourites,” her eyes light up at the name.

I shrug.

“Aren't you glad to be reading it?”

“Not really. I don't want to read it too fast because when I do I can't remember the details when we talk about specific chapters in class but she expects us to read it so slowly, it totally sucks. Plus we have to answer these stupid questions every time we read it, it's so boring.”

“I thought you liked English?”

“I do but I hate the homework,” I see my mom open her mouth to reply and quickly cut her off, “don't tell me I don't have to do my homework, I do. I have to do it because I don't know what she's going to ask, I don't know when we might have a surprise reading quiz, or what kind of things she's going to ask on the exam so I have to keep up or it will just mean more to do later.” The pressure on my chest is almost unbearable; the tears force their way back up to blur my vision. Blinking rapidly, I swipe a hand at my eyes, hoping she hasn't noticed yet.

“Oh baby,” she did notice, “I know it's a lot right now but you'll get used to it, you'll figure out what you have to do and what you can get away with not doing.”

I shake my head, there's no way I'll ever get used to this; there's no way it could get easier because I'll still always have the homework, still always have a tonne of things to do when

I get home even if I'm tired and cranky and want nothing more to curl up in front of the TV or a book that I want to read.

"It will get easier, I promise. You're just not used to it yet," she rubs my back again, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

She doesn't understand. This isn't just me feeling stressed, this is a serious and real thing. There's too much for me to do and I'm tired and I can't get it done. Being used to it won't make any difference.

Of course, a few years later I was used to it and was better able to pick my way through the mountain of work whose looming shadow had slowly taken up less and less of my perspective as I moved through grades eleven, twelve and thirteen. I still felt the pressure and anxiety over not doing everything but I was better able to whip through chapter questions and recognize which math teacher didn't care if you didn't do every single question assigned.

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A few years later I'm sitting at the same table in a different house, doing the same thing as I work through different homework.

"You almost done, honey?" my mom asks as she sets a stack of plates down on the table beside me.

"I guess," I groan.

"What are you working on?" she leans over to look at the page of writing in front of me.

"My stupid article report thingy for history."

“Didn’t you just do one of those?”

“Yeah,” I sigh, “I have to do it every other week.”

“You’re not interested in it?”

“I was. It was fun at first but now,” I shrug, “we just have to do the same thing every time.”

“You can do different topics, pick different kinds of articles, right?”

“Yeah but you still have to answer these questions. It’s not hard, it’s just annoying. I get the point of it, to make makes us stop and think about the article and actually talk about it, like, from different perspectives, it’s just annoying to have to keep doing it the exact same way over and over again.”

My mom pats me on the arm consolingly before turning back to the kitchen to continue setting the table, calling back over her shoulder, “you don’t have to do it, you know.”

“I know,” I grumble good-naturedly, turning back to my final paragraph. I quickly summarize my report and pack away my books in preparation for dinner. Finishing the report was boring and frustrating but I’m glad I finished and look forward to earning another near perfect score on the assignment now that I have the formula worked out and know what Mrs. D looks for.

## **Courses**

I stare down at the test paper on the desk in front of me and my heart sinks as I skim over the questions. Of all the options, of all the types of questions she could ask from this past unit, these are almost all of the ones I struggle with. Remembering the studying skills workshops from grade nine, I work through the questions I know I can do, dashing them off quickly so I can use

the remainder of my time working through the harder material. Even though I'm following the advice we'd been given about how to take tests I hesitate and slow down to try and double-check my answers. In the last test I lost marks due to small errors and I'm nervous that with the added difficulty of the material on this one those part marks might make all the difference.

Finished with the easy stuff I read over the first of the more challenging question and my stomach knots a little tighter. My mind drifts as I read the details of the question, and I have to fight to stay focused. I've never been able to understand these fence questions, how we're supposed to be able to figure out the maximum size of three equal areas contained and separated by a set amount of fencing material, and I can feel the panic building in my chest. I glance up, shifting in my hard seat but catch myself before I tuck my feet into the bookrack beneath the seat of the desk in front of me. The kid who sits there hates it when I do that. I glance around the room. Everyone else is bent over their papers and the low rustle of pencils scratching and papers shuffling as pages are turned fills my ears.

I turn back to the question in front of me. My mind empties as I try to read it again. Starting to panic I distract myself by looking at the marking key. If I get all the easy questions right, without any errors, I think I'll still pass but the thought of getting barely a 50 on the test makes my heart pick up and hammer in my chest as a thin wave of greasy nausea rolls through my gut. I try to focus on the question one more time. I stumble through the steps I remember, hoping to earn part marks for the technical steps even if I can't actually solve the problem correctly, dimly feeling that it's kind of cheating as I recalculate my potential mark based on the addition of a couple part marks for things like therefore statements or the inclusion of diagrams. With these marks included I think I can nudge my overall mark a bit past sixty, which isn't terrible considering I did much better on the last test. Assuming, that is, that I score perfect marks

on the questions I know I can do, something I have yet to ever achieve as no matter how closely I check and recheck my work I always seem to mix up some numbers, add something incorrectly or mess up the basic arithmetic somehow.

My distracted and distressed mind flits back a few weeks to our graphing unit. That was math I understood. It was formulaic and functional. I could pull apart the equations and reproduce the expected figures on the graphs with relative ease because it made sense to me. I understood how parabolas took their shape and loved the process of mapping them out, the symmetry and order of the pretty little graphs lined up neatly beside the columns of equations. Their variance and individual characteristics made sense to me and I found it fascinating to play with them, noting how one change in the math resulted in a different visual outcome on the graph. Beyond the cognitive processes of working out the graphs I enjoyed the actual process of drawing them, of measuring and counting, connecting the points in sweeping curves. Ever since I was a kid and discovered the joy of drawing on a spare pad of graph paper at my dad's house I've loved geometric shapes in art and this type of math, to my pleasant surprise, had tapped into that joy once again.

Today, however, there is no cut and dried answers to be plotted tidily in the nice little squares on the graph paper. There is no clean and clear process in my head to follow, no way to check my process against itself. There is only this gaping space where I feel my understanding should be. The teacher has tried to explain these questions to me, I've asked questions in class and stayed after the lesson to talk about them, but I still just don't get it and I can feel my frustration building in my chest. I couldn't even articulate why I don't understand these questions, they've just never 'clicked' for me and as I'm scrambling, trying to force my brain to



remember the steps I went over and over both in class and at home with my mom, I feel the icy despair creep in along the heat of the panic building in my chest.

Why are these questions so hard for me? Why is math so hard? I hate this class and I hate the stupid universities for making me take math even if I want to study English or maybe a social science.

I look up at the clock for the millionth time this period. With time running short I move through the remaining questions as quickly as I can, discouraged and bored of my own anxiety. I hand in my paper with five minutes to spare and return to my desk only noticing the tension in my shoulders and back as it slowly loosens, washing gently away in a flood of helpless acceptance tinged with hints of relief that at least it's out of my hands now and, aside from maybe a question or two on the exam, I will never have to deal with that particularly nasty type of math ever again.

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“Oh my gosh,” my partner bounces in her seat, her eyes shining with excitement, “we should do our presentation like a documentary, like a TV show.”

“What?”

“You know, we'll make a fake TV screen and then present the stuff like we're doing a documentary on ancient Egypt.”

Her enthusiasm is starting to rub off on me but I'm still confused,

“How will that actually work? How are we going to make a TV screen we can actually fit inside?”

“We’ll make a big one out of cardboard,” she waves off my question with a shake of her hand, “it’ll be great.”

“But we’re just supposed to present the stuff,” I say, still a bit leery of this new proposal.

“Mrs. N won’t care, she’ll love it.”

After a bit of reflection I realize I have to agree with her there, that of any teacher, Mrs. N would appreciate the novelty of my friend’s proposed plan and enjoy our rather unique plan for the presentation.

“Okay,” I nod slowly, “so what are we actually going to say, though?”

Over the course of the next week we each did a small amount of research on our own, answering the questions we were given for our topic, but spent the majority of time discussing our plan for the presentation itself in class, between classes, and over the phone once we’d both gone home for the day. Our exuberance and giddy excitement over this project is noticed by friends, and gently mocked by some, but we don’t care. We’re both caught up in the energy of it and I’m delighted to be having so much fun with a project I expected to be nothing more than reading and then describing what we read out loud to the class.

A few days before the presentation we meet at my friend’s house to build our TV set and make final arrangements

“I got these from my uncle, I think we can make a screen with them,” she said, showing me a small pile of plain cardboard boxes.

“Cool. I have a safari hat I borrowed from my cousin and a beige shirt thing from my dad.”

“Awesome,” she grins at me, doing her familiar happy dance bouncing back and forth on the balls of her feet.

“But how are we doing with the content?” I ask hesitantly. I am loving planning our presentation and spending our time making up all kinds of fantastic scenes we would do if we had more time, and an actual budget to buy the props we don’t have, but I haven’t been able to shake the niggle of worry in the back of my mind. We’re having fun and I want to embrace her approach but can’t quite shake my concern over how our presentation will be perceived.

“Oh, we’ve got that covered,” she dismisses my concern easily.

And, to my surprise, I find myself believing her. For the first time since I started school I’m happy to be blending my own creativity and enjoyment with more specific course material. We’re having a blast and while I am always keeping an eye on the ‘purpose’ of the assignment, to present the material we’ve been told to cover, I trust in my gut feeling that Mrs. N will get a kick out of our approach and the fact that she’s known to be a relatively easy marker, someone more concerned with class discussions and broader understanding than finicky details or exact answers. Plus, my friend is fully and unreservedly committed and she always gets good marks so I’m happy to trust in her plan based on her more extensive understanding of ‘how school works’, ignoring my own anxieties.

We move on, laughing and joking, both of us caught up in the excitement of our ‘big project’ as we cut and tape and staple, wrestling with the thick cardboard and the flimsy frame we are constructing.

The day of our presentation comes and I’m suddenly nervous. We manage to rig up the frame with broomsticks and twine tying it off to the wall behind us but it’s not as impressive looking as I’d pictured it. We get to present first, given the fact that we had to spend our spare period putting up the TV frame and it takes up the entire front of the classroom, leaving no room for other presenters to stand until it is taken down. Our classmates’ confusion and laughter upon

entering the room and seeing the large frame makes me feel vaguely self-conscious but at the time I don't reflect on it, only realizing later that I was worried about our level of enthusiasm, nervously aware that it wasn't 'cool' to be this excited, to have put this much energy into a project like this. The embarrassment passes quickly, however, as we take 'the stage' and launch into our tongue-in-cheek documentary, drawing heavily from both the irreverent comedy of Monty Python and the quiet academic narration of David Attenborough as we discuss and hypothesize about ancient Egyptian life.

My friend and I caper through the material, mostly managing not to laugh at our own jokes, and we get a lot of laughs from the class as Mrs. N watches on with an amused smile. I can tell she's more appreciative of our enthusiasm than either the content or the creativity of our presentation but I don't care. We have fun and it would appear that the class does too.

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"What are we supposed to be doing?" I ask my partner, Mack, in a hushed voice.

"I dunno," he shrugs, "building a crane, I guess."

"Yeah but how?" I bend over the laminated lesson guide for our project, scanning the information contained in the brightly coloured bullets and bubbles without really reading anything. I'm wary. Mr. S seems really friendly and laid-back but we are being marked on these activities and I have no idea what he really expects. The course description was pretty vague and from the brief introduction Mr. S gave at the beginning of class all I know is that we'll be working in partners on different activities and tasks, mostly doing some kind of problem solving,

and then submitting reports on our work for marks but he didn't say anything about what that really means or how we're supposed to go about the tasks.

The materials in front of us remind me of interactive activity days at the science centre or on of the various science/tech kits we had at home and my knee-jerk reaction is to pick up the pieces and start playing with them but I know we're supposed to follow specific steps and do the assignment, not just blindly experiment with what the technology can do. My mind flashes back to a memory of me, at about eight-years-old, so excited to start using my brand new chemistry set that I jumped right in and ended up ripping the labels off the plastic shelves, leaving my mom trying to identify the chemicals to reassign them before I was allowed to do anything with the mysterious powders. I try to read over the info sheet again but find that I'm still not understanding where we're supposed to start.

"Let's see," Mack squints down his nose through non-existent reading glasses and reads the report form Mr. S gave us in a stuffy faux English accent, "Complete the assigned activity and answer the following questions." I giggle and he grins at me, returning to his normal voice, "So I guess we're supposed to complete the assigned activity and then answer the following questions."

I roll my eyes and punch him lightly on the arm before looking over the materials in the plastic bin: a bunch of tubes, various connecting and small girder-like pieces, a wide range of gears, and a small winch with a metal hook on the end of a sturdy looking string. I pull out the winch and glance between it and the small weight Mr. S left on the desk.

"How is this little plastic thing supposed to lift this?" I heft the weight in my hand, it's even heavier than I expected it to be.

“Hmmm,” Mack is reading through the module lesson guide. “Looks like we’re supposed to play with the gear setup and increase the output of the motor by using different sized gears in different combinations.”

I thought I understood how gears work but now that I stop and think about it, I have no idea what they do, besides the basic principle of interlocking-teeth-turn-different-wheels thing.

“Like changing gears on a bike to make it easier to pedal?” I say, half to myself, excitement building as my mind races down various avenues of possibility and understanding.

“Yeah,” Mack’s face lights up, “I think that’s the idea.”

“Okay, cool,” I nod and reach a hand out for the report form knowing I’m going to have to read it for myself to understand the principles behind the process.

We spend the next forty minutes happily experimenting with gear ratios, feigning frustration when Mr. S makes us repeat the exercise lifting his massive set of keys from the floor after our initial success with the smaller weight. In truth, however, we are delighted with the further challenge. When Mr. S calls out a warning that class is over in ten minutes, Mack and I look at each other in disbelief,

“Oh shit,” he curses under his breath, “the report.”

My heart sinks. We’d been having so much fun goofing around and playing with the different outcomes of different designs that we forgot to document our process. I grab a pencil and we race through the first few questions on the worksheet. Mr. S comes over to our station a few minutes later,

“Oh don’t worry too much about that, guys,” he says, waving his hand, “you can finish it tomorrow. Just make sure you make notes about what you did, what gears you used and stuff, so you remember it all.”

Mack sighs with relief and we scribble away some point-form notes about what we did and the results of the different trials.

In the following weeks Mack and I work our way through a handful of different assignments and I am surprised to find myself looking forward to the class more and more despite the fact that it is not an area I expected to be very interested in. I only took the class to meet the diploma requirement and because my cousin Joe and a few other friends, including Mack, were taking it.

A few weeks later we were working at one of the computers scattered around the classroom,

“Dude,” I laugh, “we can’t hand that in.”

“Why not? It’s beautiful.” He sits back to admire his handiwork in the paint program: a fantastical map of an island we’ve created including features like killer bees, molten lava slides and Rocky Cliffs of Doom.

“Uhm, because we’re just supposed to do the one piece and we have the pamphlet already.”

“So this is an additional part, an appendix or whatever,” he grins, “people need to know about the killer bee forest and lava watersides.”

His mock serious tone sets me off laughing again and we’re both cackling away at our own brilliance when Mr. S walks up to the computer station,

“What’s so funny over here? Mack, are you distracting Amy again?” we’re used to his fake authoritarian voice by now and I smirk at Mack. We both know he’s only pretending at playing favourites and I love to tease Mack about it when we’re not in class.

“No sir, she is distracting me,” Mack defends himself, as he always does.

“I find that highly unlikely,” Mr. S tries to scowl but breaks into a grin when he leans in to look at the map on the monitor. “So this is your graphics project? Killer bee swarms and root beer float lakes?”

“Yes sir,” Mack nods seriously, “accurate cartography is very important in the exploration of uncharted areas.”

“Yes, well it looks like you’ve charted it now,” he says with a chuckle.

“We did this part already,” I say, handing him the pamphlet we printed out at the beginning of the period.

“Hmm,” he scans the paper, unfolding it to look at the inner columns, “Beastie Boys merchandise? Brass monkeys for 29.99? I’m guessing these are references I’m too old to understand but I like what you’ve done with the format.” He turns it over and glances over the back, “it looks good but I think you can do better with the alignment here on the back.” He sets it down on the desk between us and leans in to point out that the columns aren’t aligned with the folds, “You need to change the page setup on both sides. You’ve kept it the same on both sides, which is great, but it’s not completely even, see how the first column is a little bit smaller on both sides, so they aren’t lining up when you print the back side. Its first column is printed on the back of the last one on the front so it’s uneven and not lining up when you fold it. Try to sort that out and give me a shout if you get into trouble with it.” He pats Mack on the shoulder as he turns to walk away, “lava watersides, that’s a good one but don’t lose sight of the details in everything else guys.”

By the end of the period we’ve corrected our pamphlet layout and submitted our map ‘for extra credit’ as Mack put it. I know Mr. S won’t give us bonus marks for it but we had fun making it and I can’t wait to see what he says about it when he marks the real assignment.



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My first day of photography, I'm so excited I could barely pay attention through my morning classes. Finding my way outside after math I shiver in the cold wind as I hurry to the door of the squat brick building that houses the studio. Inside the heavy metal door a corridor leads me past a row of cupboards and displays of student art which I barely glanced at to the larger open space that made up the main room. Rows of worktables fill most of the space, arranged in a squared off semicircle focusing in at the teacher's desk located in the middle. Around the outside of the room are drying racks, easels, and more cupboards. At the far end is a larger open space with sinks, counter tops and shelves holding bottles of chemicals and stacks of plastic containers. A faint slightly sour scent undercuts the usual school smell of stale dry air but I don't find it unpleasant; it's unique novelty speaks to me of chemical processing and magic of the darkroom, reminding me of my dad's stories of time spent unrecognized, caught up in the artistic process, of the satisfaction of creating a memorable print, and the joy he found in perfecting and enhancing his shots through the use of chemicals and exposure. I can't wait to get started, to take my own photos and watch them dissolve into focus in the chemical baths, to live out yet another artistic dream.

The critical side of me loves the idea of photography, artistic expression not linked to how well my drawing replicates the actual material it is modelled upon, but the romantic in me loves the idea of the process of it all, the glowing red light in the darkroom, the experimenting and tweaking of the prints until my artistic sensibilities are satisfied. There's a mystique to my image of the darkroom, a sacred reverence for the rites and practices that come together to

produce a specific kind of art, my favourite kind of art, and I can't quite believe that I'm actually here, about to get my chance to try my hand at it.

I find a seat and do my best to hold my excitement in check, preparing to be disappointed by boring technical assignments and rigid class structures. To my pleasant surprise, Mrs. O and her classes are exactly what I'd hoped they would be.

An older lady with a faint Italian accent, Mrs. O looks every bit the part of the quintessential semi-eccentric artist with a wardrobe consisting solely of black clothing, and a revolving collection of random dangling jewellery, topped by a shock of frizzy orange hair. While we have assignments and are marked on our work, Mrs. O didn't seem to put too much weight on that portion of the class. She gives us specific rubrics so we know exactly how she will be marking our projects but breezes through their description to spend more time discussing the techniques and theories we are to explore in the given assignment. She is excited by our creative ideas and pushes us to explore creatively rather than reminding us to complete the assigned components. And, above all that, she treats the class as a space where we all work together without the authoritarian voice many teachers, especially those teaching less structured subjects like art, tend to fall back when students step out of line.

"Now, where is that thing," Mrs. O, mutters, sidestepping between the chairs to reach the seat in the middle of the row of worktables.

I look up from where I am carefully slicing through a set of prints with a craft knife.

"Ah ha," she exclaims, lifting the red stuffed toy from a student's open bag. A playful smile spreading across her face, she glances around at those of us working at the tables nearby and whispers, "you saw nothing," before quickly retracing her steps and tucking the toy away in

a seldom-used cupboard by the front door of the studio. Pressing a finger to her lips and winking at us, she returns to her desk.

Twenty minutes later, with only a few minutes left to the class, one of my fellow students comes out of the darkroom to pack up his things. Pulling out his backpack from under his worktable, he cries out,

“Hey, where’s my Elmo?” he glances around the surrounding area but sees no sign of the toy. “Seriously, guys,” he glares, half amused at the joke but obviously also annoyed by it, at those of us sitting at the tables around him, “who took my Tickle-Me-Elmo?”

“It wasn’t us,” one of his friends says.

“Well someone took it.”

“Mrs. O did,” another girl whispers at him.

“No way,” he shakes his head, glaring at her. “Seriously, who took it?”

“Mrs. O,” says another student.

The boy rolls his eyes, “Yeah, sure, she took my Tickle-Me-Elmo. Where did you guys hide it?”

After we all shake our heads again he re-checked his bag half-heartedly, now convinced that we are playing a prank on him. I make slow work of packing up my own binder and pencil case, trying to keep from grinning and looking suspicious. Mrs. O finishes talking with a student about her plans for the next assignment and claps her hands,

“Ok, everyone, the bell is about to ring, pack up your things and don’t forget to bring in your objects for the light sculptures we’re going to shoot in the darkroom next week. Remember, it’s about creating silhouettes on the paper, you won’t see detail or much texture, so choose your items accordingly.”

“Mrs. O?”

“Yes?” she manages to look over at the boy without giving anything away.

“Someone took my Tickle-Me-Elmo.”

She blinks, looking confused for a moment, “Oh, you mean that devil-toy that kept laughing during my lesson?”

“Yeah, it was in my bag when I went into the darkroom and now it’s gone.”

“I hardly think one of your classmates would have stolen it, perhaps it fell under the desk?”

“No, I looked everywhere, someone must have taken it,” his voice rises, his frustration obviously escalating.

“That’s a serious accusation to make, perhaps they just hid it to keep you from distracting them in future classes?” she smiles at him knowingly but the boy is rooting through his bag once more to show her it is not where he left it and he misses the look.

“But it was right here and now it’s gone,” he protests. He looks up at her cautiously, “You didn’t put it somewhere, did you?” he asked hesitantly.

“Me? What would I have to do with your toy?”

When he looks back down to check under the desk again Mrs. O winks at the rest of us,

“Why ever would I take a student’s possession, especially one that disrupted my class?”

It takes him a second before he understands her tone but when he does he stares back at her in disbelief, “You did take it,” he exclaims.

Finally breaking down, she grins at him, “Well now it is my turn to be laughing, no?”

He continues to stare at her as she chuckles and points to the cabinet where she stashed the toy, “I tell you where I have hidden your toy but if you bring a distraction to my studio again you might not get it back so easily,” she chided.

He grins bashfully but chuckles as he crosses to the cupboard and pulls the toy out from the cabinet. The rest of the class begin filing towards the door in anticipation of the bell and Mrs. O walks with us. When the boy squeezes the toy and sets off a round of it’s maniacal canned laughter she laughs in response,

“Such a horrible thing, this is for children? It would give me nightmares,” she shudders and pats the boy on the shoulder, “you were worried you had lost it. My prank was a good one then?”

He nods, smiling, all sign of tension and annoyance gone, “Totally.” He looks down at his shoes just as the bell rings, shuffling his feet. “I’m sorry for interrupting class,” he says, flashing an apologetic smile up at Mrs. O as he joins the line of students shuffling out into the bright sunlight.

“I know,” Mrs. O pats his shoulder reassuringly.

### ***Upper years***

I glance over the pages of my test and look back at the clock. I’m done with loads of time to spare and am worried that I missed a question or a page since no one else is done yet. Satisfied that I’ve answered everything I try to review my work searching for minor errors in the arithmetic. As usual, my brain doesn’t comply and I stare blankly at the numbers on the page, only able to see what I’ve done, not instances where I should have done otherwise. Eventually I sigh and resign myself to my fate, standing up to walk as quietly as I can through the rows of

students still bent over their desks. I hand Ms. D my paper and return to my seat in the third row, pulling my English book out from the shelf mounted under the seat.

A few minutes later I look up to see Ms. E standing next to my desk.

She slides my paper back onto my desk and leans in,

“What’s five times six, Amy?” she asks in a hushed voice.

“Uhm, thirty?”

“Check question five and question three,” she winks at me and returns to her desk.

I look at the questions she circled and quickly correct those errors just before Ms. E makes an announcement to the class,

“We’re at the fifteen minute mark, people. If you finish between now and the bell please stay in your seats and hand your paper in after the period ends so that you don’t disrupt your neighbours who are still writing.

After the bell rings I file forward with the rest of the class and linger at the back of the crowd to be one of the last ones handing in their paper. When it’s finally my turn I add it to the stack on the desk,

“Thanks for the help,” I mumble, suddenly embarrassed by the mistakes I made.

“It’s no problem,” she smiles, “you’re allowed to use a calculator in the other units so it’s only fair that you don’t lose marks over silly mistakes like that in this one. You’re a good student and you understand what you’re doing, you just need to slow down and think twice about what you do.”

“I know,” I nod, blushing at the praise, “but no matter how many times I look it over I never see the mistakes.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing I’m good at catching them,” she jokes, “and I don’t mind doing it if you hand your paper in early, even when you can use a calculator, but just to be clear, I won’t tell you about any larger mistakes you make, just the little finicky ones like that.”

“Oh, I know. That wouldn’t be fair.”

She nods, appearing to be pleased with my acknowledgement of the moral line.

I bid her farewell and walk out of the room more relaxed than I can ever remember feeling after a math test. Even though I know she only saved me, at best, a couple of marks I’m happy to feel like someone is on my side against the math and break into a grin when I recall her praise. Maybe my mark in this class won’t keep me out of my first choice of universities after all.

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“For those of you who’ve taken a class with me before,” Mr. D nods at myself and a few other students who were in my grade twelve English class with him last year, “you’ll remember the reading journal assignments. He holds up his copy of the sheet he’s distributed to the class, “You’re marked out of three: a one means you read the lines and can tell me what happened in the readings; a two means you can read between the lines and speak not only about the action but about developments, character relationships, tensions, narrative devices, tone and stuff like that; and a three means you’re reading beyond the lines, everything from the two column but also discussing relations to other readings, universal themes, broader impacts of the narrative style and that kind of big picture stuff. Take a moment to read the rubric I’ve given you to make sure you understand what I’m looking for. We’ll be doing them every week or so but you get two free

passes to either not submit one or have your lowest two marks dropped if you complete all of them.”

I look down at the sheet resting on top of my binder. It’s the same one we had last year, I’m pretty sure. He’s drawn a spectrum line across the page with three columns of bullet pointed items under the respective numbers listing components that must be included in a reflection paper in order to achieve that grade. I know some people really struggled with these assignments last year but I loved them. I was nervous at first but as soon as I got my first paper back with a three on it and a full paragraph of hand-written response discussing my thoughts and sharing his own, I was hooked.

This year is no different, with regard to the journal. We do a chunk of assigned readings and then get a chance to talk about our thoughts one-on-one via the journal entries, and hear what Mr. D thinks in his responses. I love writing the page-long entries and find it a really helpful exercise in making myself stop and think about what I’m reading, stepping back and reflecting on the material rather than just blasting through to see how the story ends. I like that I’m not only learning more about what I think about what I’m reading, in a way I can’t in a lecture or group discussion where other people’s thoughts are part of what’s happening, but also that I get to hear from Mr. D directly specifically in reference to my thoughts rather than those of the whole class.

A few weeks later we’re discussing our independent study project.

“So, we can do whatever we want?” a student asks, looking up from the assignment sheet in confusion.

“Yes and no,” Mr. D is standing at the front of the classroom wearing his usual sweater vest and reminding me, as always, of the dad from *Family Ties* in both his appearance and his patient, wise demeanour. “You can present your material in any form, for any audience, but I still



need to see the components listed in the assignment handout. You can pick any subject matter or sub-genre you want, frame your perspective on a specific topic, such as the role of women in fantasy literature, or looking at a specific author or branch of the genre, and then present your thoughts in a manner that fits your material. Most students do a traditional paper but, for instance, if you want to study graphic novels and discuss how a handful of books use images to convey or develop the story or character development, well then maybe it makes sense to write a graphic novel or use some kind of art-based presentation style. Something other than stick-figures, I mean.”

Laughter, side conversations, and exclamations swell and he waits a moment before raising his hands for order,

“This doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want at the last minute, we’re going to be meeting throughout the term to talk about your projects and where you’re going with them. You need to incorporate something we’ve talked about in class, such as the hero’s journey, archetypes, or themes et cetera. And,” he paused to look at us seriously, “I mean it about the stick-figures, it has to be of good quality, both the final presentation material and the work you put into building that final content.”

The bell rings and the room explodes in rustles of paper, snaps of binder rings and chatter as we pack up.

“Think about it over the weekend, we’re going to start meeting one-on-one to talk about your ideas next week,” Mr. D calls over the noise before we start to shuffle out, “have a great weekend, guys.”

## **Power, respect, autonomy, and choice**

The small office is stuffy and I force myself to take a deep breath before the walls seem to move in any closer. I can feel the nervous sweat run down the centre of my back and I'm glad to have chosen a dark sweater that morning, knowing that it renders the large damp patches under my arms invisible from where my vice-principal is sitting.

“Okay, so what brings you here to my office today?” he asks. I have never had any interaction with prior to today's appointment, and he seems slightly concerned to find me sitting across from him.

“I um, well, I don't want to stand up for *Oh Canada* any more,” I say, trying to maintain eye contact and smile confidently, “and, uh, well I know I have the right to opt out and I just wanted to talk about how that works before I did anything.”

He blinks away the brief look of surprise and smiles at me politely, tension pulling at the corners of his mouth, “can I ask why you've made this decision?”

“Sure, well, it's because I don't believe in the lyrics and have an issue with nationalistic pride and it just doesn't feel comfortable given these beliefs. I mean,” my stammering fades as I remember my discussion the night before with my mom, “it goes against my beliefs regarding nationalism and personal autonomy and I'm happy to discuss alternatives with you but am no longer comfortable standing for the national anthem every morning.”

He nods thoughtfully, “you seem to have put a lot of thought into this and I appreciate you coming to me. Do your parents know about this decision?”

I nod, “My mom does.”

“And how does she feel about it? Did she give you her permission to do this? What about your father?”

I shrug, somehow surprised by this line of questioning but realizing on the tail of that surprise that I really shouldn't be, yet another hippy-child moment in a world of hierarchical parenting assumptions. "Yeah, she's fine with it," not that it should matter. I keep the rest of the sentence to myself and try not to let my eyes tighten into a glare of frustration. "And it's just my mom at home so," I drift off, waiting for his next question, bracing myself to defend my position against the worst case scenario of his complete rejection and judgement.

"Okay," he nods again as he pauses before continuing with a hint of uncertainty in his voice, "Okay, well, if this isn't about protest or causing a disturbance, I don't see why you can't leave your homeroom class and sit in the hallway, we make the same allowance for religious beliefs. But make sure that you drop your things off in class first so that your teacher knows that you're there and not just late. I guess, hmm," he glances down at my file lying open on his desk, "I'll have to give you a note to give to Mr. D so that he knows I've given you permission to leave the room. Does he already know about your decision?"

"No," I shake my head. The ball of tension and worry in my gut had begun to loosen as the VP accepted my decision but with the mention of my homeroom teacher, a teacher I admire and respect, it clenches again, weighing down the relief I'd begun to feel. I hadn't thought about having to tell other people about this decision too.

"Okay, well you give him this note and tell him to call me if he has any concerns," he says absently as he scribbles a few lines on a memo pad. Tearing off the note he looks back up at me, "I appreciate your maturity and desire to do this through the proper channels." He smiles as he hands the note to me.

I take it and return the smile as I stand, "Yeah, uh, thanks."

I fold the note and tuck it into my pocket carefully as I make my way from his office, past the secretaries' desks, and back into the main hall.

My friend is waiting for me outside, "So, how did it go?"

I shrug, "It's cool, I just have to give a note to Mr. D."

She punches me on the arm, "Attagirl, you radical hippy."

I smile and relish the relief that runs through me, letting go of the tension I didn't realize I was holding in my shoulders with a sudden drop. As I bid my friend goodbye to head out to the photography studio for my next class I can't help but smile to myself. I did it. I stood up for what I believe and got what I wanted. Well, almost. I realize a small drop of disappointment in my wave of pride is coming from his praise of my methods. I went to him to discuss my options, to acknowledge that I wanted to do something against the rules and create some kind of dialogue regarding this topic. I did it as a matter of my own integrity, to recognize their expectations and negotiate with them, not because I wanted to use proper channels or felt they had the right to grant or deny me permission. I tell myself that it doesn't matter, that I did what felt right to me and that's what counts, but deep down I wish I'd pushed him harder, wished I pointed out that there was nothing wrong with staging a protest or disrupting a practice you find deplorable or disrespectful. But I didn't. Maybe I'm not such a radical after all.

A few weeks later and I'm lounging around in the hallway waiting for my friend to drop her things off so we can go hang out in the washroom while everyone else stands for the anthem. We'd sat in the hallway at first but after being yelled at by a teacher who didn't know we had permission to do so we realized that we'd have to explain it again and again to other teachers so we gave up and moved to the washroom every morning just before the bell rang.

An angry voice interrupts my wandering thoughts and I look up to see a boy from my class being harangued by none other than the teacher who yelled at my friend and I for sitting in the hallway. I don't hear everything that she's saying but her eyes are blazing and she's jabbing a finger at the floor. The boy is defensive and apologizes for something,

"I'm sorry, I'll clean it," he protests.

"You shouldn't have done it in the first place," she snaps, essentially ignoring his apology.

From the brief exchange of words I surmise that he must have spat on the floor but he appears genuinely sorry for it and says he hadn't meant to, that he did it without thinking. The teacher doesn't appear to hear a word he says, never mind respond to his obvious shame and embarrassment over the whole thing. His tone quickly changes from meek attempts to explain his behaviour and protest the vehemence of her reaction to one of humiliated apology.

The teacher stands over him, still glaring and fuming as he kneels down and mops at the floor with paper towel he got from the bathroom.

I cringe and look away, embarrassed for him and furious with her belittling as she continues to berate him for his thoughtlessness, disrespect (oh, the irony) and for being 'disgusting'.

I barely know the boy, he transferred here just this semester, but he seems very shy and soft-spoken. He dresses like a bit of a punk in old army jackets and big black Doc Marten boots but I've never heard him say anything political or seen him disrupt class in anyway, he just sits quietly at the back and seems smart based on his comments in classroom discussions. I watch him stand up slowly, curling his six-foot-something bulky frame inwards as much as he can in his faded green coat with his head hanging so low it makes my neck hurt. He clenches the paper

towel in on hand, staring at the scuffed toes of his boots, while the teacher steps in and stares up at him, continuing her admonition and I want nothing more than to march across the hallway and scream in her face to shut up and leave him alone. But I don't. I am frozen in a combination of embarrassment for having witnessed his shame and fear for getting involved. I know that she won't hear my objection to her tone, that she is right and he is wrong and that my position as a witness doesn't count because I'm a student. I watch him mumble yet another apology and shuffle off behind her towards The Office and want to burst into tears at my own failure, at my feeling of powerlessness, and the ridiculous injustice of her behaviour.

I detest spitting in public and feel sickened by the idea of someone spitting on the floor indoors but he apologized over and over and was obviously genuinely sorry for what he did but she continued to attack him in such a demoralizing and personal manner. I feel shaken and disturbed by her behaviour but can't say I'm exactly surprised by it in any way.

"Hey," my friend dashes up, her cheeks flushed, "just made it, man the sidewalks are icy out there," she huffs, pushing open the bathroom door beside me. I nod absently and follow her into the washroom.

I don't mention what I saw to her or anyone. I know that the teacher was out of line and that if I could produce a video of the exchange others would agree but without proof of her tone there is nothing to break down the wall between her rights and privileges as a teacher and the rights of her students.

I spend the rest of the period in a bit of a haze trying to forget what I saw and how shaken it left me. Just a few weeks ago that same teacher yelled at us but wasn't nearly as aggressive and backed off completely when we explained we had permission from the Vice Principal. Was it because we were 'good kids', honour roll students that she had personally taught? Was it because

we responded with concern and immediately explained our perceived transgression? Was spitting something that just pushed her buttons? None of that mattered. If I let my thoughts drift back to the hallway all I can think about is her vitriolic anger spewing out at his beaten figure and I know, deep down in my heart, that her behaviour was inexcusable. Would it have made a difference if I'd protested? What if I'd gone with them to the office to share my views of what happened? It's possible that she would have been reprimanded but I know that she can easily defend and justify her actions, which is what I'm certain she will do based on my experiences in her classes, downplaying the severity. I know that the boy and I hold no power in a matter of our words against hers. So while there is always a chance someone might have listened, I know her and I know the system and know that nothing that could be done would undo how small and ashamed she made him feel.

I can barely bring myself to look the boy in the eye when he returns to class a week later, after completing his suspension, but go out of my way in the next few days to be more friendly with him and try to make him feel more welcome in his new school.

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When I was in high school there were three levels of OAC (grade thirteen for students heading to university) English classes you could take. English I and III consisted of two different levels of difficulty in a somewhat traditional English class focusing on a specific topic/genre in literature such as comedy and satire or human capacity for evil and included a large independent

study project while English II was one course, Writers' Craft, involving writing in different formats and genres along with reading examples in each unit. In order to take a level III course you had to already take one of the I's or Writers' Craft. Most people took one, as required by most English speaking universities and maybe two if they really liked writing or one of the topics in level III. I took four OAC English credits.

"What are you going to meet with your guidance counsellor about this time?" Holly asked, with a half-mocking smile.

I shrug, "Same thing I go to see him about every term, Pinky," I reference a popular children's show and mimic the voice of the cartoon mouse bent on world domination, "try to take over my schedule."

She laughs, "I can't believe how much you change your courses, every term you go back to them after we get the schedules; you're so picky!"

"I guess," I hadn't really thought about it but none of my friends ever seemed as concerned about their schedules as I was, they didn't really care who taught what class or what other options they had. They sometimes tried to make changes to avoid a teacher they particularly couldn't stand or to try and get the spare period they wanted, as my cousin Joe often did so he could sleep in. "I just like to see what's possible and try to make it something I'll like," I finish lamely, not able to explain how important it is to me to know that I've explored every possibility and built the schedule that I'll be most happy with.

"Whatever, weirdo," she says with a friendly laugh and wave as I head up the stairs to the administrative area.

Seated in the familiar chair across from the friendly face of my counsellor I feel the usual tension in my gut. I don't know why I'm always stressed about these meetings but I've always



felt that I have to keep my cards close to my chest, hiding my true motivations and trying to get what I want without being honest, with him or myself really, about what I'm trying to do.

Ultimately, I want to avoid boring classes taught by boring and/or mean teachers but never really come out and say that, not wanting to offend my counsellor or end up with any teacher knowing that I'm actively avoiding a class with them.

“So, because you took two English classes last year and grade twelve this term you could take an English OAC next term,” he offers after we start discussing my options based on my ideas about where I want to go to university and what I want to study.

“Okay,” I nod, English is good. “Is Mr. D teaching an OAC next term?” Mr. D is the new head of the English department and my current teacher. I really like his class.

He punches a few keys on the antiquated keyboard and squints at the monochromatic display, “Nope, sorry. But Mr. W is teaching an OAC I.”

“Which one?” I ask even as he looks down to the course handbook to check the course code.

“Canadian literature.”

“Hmm,” it's not my favourite topic, not one I was thinking about taking, but I like the idea of studying just about anything with him better than most of the other options we've discussed. “Does it fit my schedule?”

He nods, his focus returning to the screen, “Yup, we'd just have to move you into Mrs. D's calculus instead of Mrs. Q's.” I try to suppress my grin, having had a class with Mrs. Q this term one of my other goals of this meeting was to get out of her calculus class. “Okay, that sounds fine.”

He works the keyboard again, making the change, “Okay, that’s done. Anything else you wanted to talk about?”

“Uhm, not really.”

“Great, well have a happy holidays,” he says with a smile, standing up to show me out of the office.

A year later and I’m back in the seat,

“So, I guess I need another credit to take the place of that one then? Uhm, is Mr. D teaching any English OAC’s?”

“You already have Writers’ Craft next term and you’ve already taken a I last year and a III this term.”

“I know,” I shrug, “But I’m going to have my six OAC’s already, including the math credit I need for U of T.”

He does his thing with the computer and the course handbook, “Yup, Mr. D is teaching Fantasy lit.”

Not my favourite genre but, like last year, I’d rather take that than a course I have equally little interest in with a teacher I don’t like as much.

“Okay, does it fit into my schedule?”

“But,” he looks at me for a moment, “you don’t need that credit.”

“I know, but I need to take three courses to be full time and be allowed to do extracurriculars, right?”

“Yes,” he nods slowly, clearly confused, “but the OAC III’s all have the same course code so on your transcript you’d have two of the same courses.”

“Will it look like I failed or had to take it again?” I’m not sure why he’s so concerned about this.

“No, I’m not sure how it will show up, no one’s ever taken more than one before.”

I shrug uncomfortably, “is it a problem?”

“Not technically, I don’t think so. But wouldn’t you rather take something else? A history or geography credit?”

“Not really. I like English.”

He blinks at me before nodding, “okay, okay then. Well, I’ll have to see how this works in terms of your transcript and how the computer system will handle it. It might mean that only one, the higher mark, shows up on your transcript in the end.”

“Does that affect my eligibility for sports and stuff during the term?”

“No, that’s a board policy, something we’re required to enforce but not something that would cause a problem as long as you’re attending the class and participating in assignments and everything.”

“Great,” I smile, relieved and kind of excited about this development. Looks like next term won’t be as boring as I thought it might be.

### ***And there the story ends...***

...before it begins again in a new form on the next page. So to be more accurate, ‘and there the narrative, creative writing portion of this work ends’. I hope that the above chapter achieved one of the purposes of this work, allowing you to put yourself in my shoes and share in my lived experiences of those settings (as I recall them now). As I now turn my attention to my second purpose, to explore these experiences from an academic perspective using a lens of

leisure studies, below you will find (slightly?) more traditional academic writing exploring my thoughts on these narratives, my experiences and what I've thought about and learned over the course of this work.

## **Chapter 5 (*Reflection/Discussion*): a multifaceted experience**

After writing my autoethnographic snapshots I was left with the weighty decision of how to process, reflect upon and discuss their content with you. On one hand I hope that they can stand alone, that they carry weight and significance on their own that has shown you something new, caused you to reflect upon your own learning experiences, and/or triggered some other kind of critical reflection on these topics. On the other hand, I want to talk specifically about what I learned about learning settings, and experiences of them, as a result of my reflection upon them through the lens of human experience exploration and have, therefore, included the following reflection chapter to share with you not only my thoughts about this material but also how and where I see it responding to and building on existing academic literature. In this way I will refer back to my two guiding research questions, looking at both the personal/emotional and cultural facets of these experiences, exploring both sides and discussing my thoughts on what I've learned through this study.

Before we get into the meat of that discussion, however, I want to share a bit about my process and how this section came to be so you understand both my perspective as I worked through the material and how I see the chapter fitting into the project as a whole. I hope this preamble will be helpful in setting the stage and framing the following material in a methodological/processual context for your engagement and subsequent interpretation.

### ***A short housekeeping, process-note***

Autoethnography is a messy method. For me it is, anyway. Embracing the lived experience and trying to explore it as a whole, resisting the urge to always separate, categorize

and label every piece individually, made it difficult for me to analyze or discuss themes and concepts concretely because they overlap, intersect, and influence each other as they weave in and out of the experiences in different forms. In writing this section, however, I've come to understand the messiness a bit better, gained some clarity and perspective on how the messiness takes shape and come to a deeper understanding of my own experiences within a broader cultural context.

One of the messiest bits of working with this section was looking at how different facets of experience shape and influence each other. At first my logical, category-loving mind struggled to frame some kind of cause-and-effect relationship between these facets. And it was a frustrating fight that brought different factors to the forefront at different times, tying my neat little threads of analysis into knots of Gordian proportion. What I came to eventually understand, however, is that it's not so much a linear string of relationships but rather a flow of different factors that link and merge, swirling together, nudging the weight of the experience in different directions based on the sum of their respective presence, strength and intensity at any given moment in any given interaction, or my perception of it as I look back over the years. And with this realization, that it's a reoccurring shifting ongoing interaction between factors, the knots fell away and I was free to reflect and discuss my findings. Except that it was no longer a neat and clean linear discussion, it was a messy roundabout dialogue that doubled back on itself and revisited different relationships and intersections as different factors were considered, described and explored. And isn't that a lovely way of seeing life?

After multiple attempts at 'writing my way through' this reflection, I realized that in order to resolve this issues I had to let go of my compulsion to include absolutely everything in this paper; I had to relax and remind myself that this work has a specific focus, specific questions

to answer, and realign myself with the understanding that I cannot possibly share with you every single thought and emotion I've had while working through it. I was eventually able to embrace this individual interpretation of the work and learned to enjoy the freedom these decisions gave me as they released me from the immense pressure of my own perfectionism and struggles with wanting to explore every possible avenue and related tangent. Working through this process I realized that by letting go in this way I was able to actually pull the work closer, find a firmer grip and move forward with it in a more solid and cohesive manner.

In this reflection process I also struggled with the decision of how to deal with ideas or concepts that went beyond what is included in just the snapshots themselves. Ultimately, I decided that this study is about exploring my experiences as a whole, not just isolating and analyzing those specific episodes in isolation, so I did not restrict myself to their content exclusively as material for this reflection but have done my best to focus primarily on the snapshots, as they are the primary content of this work, and recognize when I'm drifting off into a tangent or when a particular experience comes to be significant enough that I've had to go back and write it up as its own snapshot to be included in the larger story (which I did end up having to do in a couple instances because I wanted you to get a more detailed and evocative experience of that story in particular).

Underlying all of this methodological discussion about this chapter, however, is the interpretivist belief that this is all still just my story, my memory, my version of these events. And, with the partial and limited nature of human events, it is of course important to note that my findings here are framed by my own perspective and shaped by my beliefs. When considering the limitations of this process and the possibility of selective memory directing my work, I was at first somewhat concerned about your response. Would everyone say, 'sure, she found \_\_\_\_\_

that's what she went looking for in the first place'? Would my ultimate discussion simply be a regurgitation of what I wanted to see in this material? While I'm not going to get into the broader epistemological/methodological debate regarding the influence of every researcher on their work, I will say that for me, what I found was new material, new information, new insight into my experiences, into the stories I already knew, and, thereby, the result of a useful exercise in exploration. Building from Ellis' work (Ellis, 2000; 2004; 2009), this project has looked in and out from my story, my (counter) narrative of my insider/outside experiences to the broader sociocultural and academic contexts offering up for you, my dear reader, a distinct story and my thoughts on what that story means, or could mean.

In tackling the complicated issue of memory, Ellis acknowledges the possibility of selectivity and distortion over time but includes this factor as part of how autoethnography work, noting that similar issues arise in asking others about their memories via surveys or interviews and explaining that, 'faults' and all, our memories are what make up the stories of our lives as we understand them (e.g. Ellis, 2000; 2009). More specifically, she and Bochner and Adams (2010) explain that,

For an autoethnographer, questions of reliability refer to the narrator's credibility. Could the narrator have had the experiences described, given available "factual evidence"? Does the narrator believe that this is actually what happened to her or him? (Bochner, 2002, p.86). Has the narrator taken "literary license" to the point that the story is better viewed as fiction than a truthful account? (paragraph 33).

The reliability and validity of my memory work here, then, is in what you make of it; in your opinion of its power and veracity as 'a story' (one that could have happened to others, not just 'my story' as I see it) stands its use as research and I can only hope that I have done a sufficient job in making it feel 'real' to you. Could my perspective have further directed the following discussion of the memories? Of course. As it would in any research, my goals,



intentions and personal values have influenced my work (Ellis, 1999) but that doesn't render these perspectives as invalid or less useful. Unless, of course, when you read my discussion you find yourself sitting back thinking, 'no way, I didn't see that in the snapshots at all, this is a tenuous connection at best...' or something similar. In that case, if my reflections feel hollow or forced to you, then yes, I have failed to create a solid and reliable piece of research. If, on the other hand, you read my discussion and think, 'yes, I can see how those factors influenced her experiences and how that scene led to this new insight' well then, I will consider it a success.

In short, what follows is a collection of my thoughts based on a particular perspective regarding my experiences, one side of the crystalline form of understanding these issues, that I hope will resonate in some way for you as, "a situated story, constructed from my current position, one that is always partial, incomplete and full of silences, and told at a particular time, for a particular purpose, to a particular audience" (Ellis, 2009, p. 13). I hope that you find this material helpful in processing your own interpretation of the material covered in my study and that you are able to engage with it dialectically to come to your own thoughts and conclusions regarding learning and school.

### ***Competence, freedom, and relationships***

After multiple attempts at different approaches I finally went back to the beginning, to my purpose for this study and its inspiration: using the lens of my leisure scholarship to look for new insight into my experiences. Turning to that leisure focus, looking through a lens of contextualized, related and subjective understanding of experience and looking for experiential traits discussed in leisure literature I quickly found some common threads to follow, a way of sorting out the lovely mess to present you with something solid and insightful and, I hope, meaningful. What I found, in terms of specific insight regarding experiences, learning, and their

sociocultural context, largely fell into three areas: matters of competence and challenge, degrees of freedom/self-determination/intrinsic motivation/choice, and my relationships with the adults involved in my education. In the following chapter I will explore these three areas with you, looking back and forth from the related literature and broader context to the personal experiences in the snapshots, exploring how sociocultural structures and discourses impact daily life and how personal experiences can reflect, reject or reinforce cultural frameworks.

For the sake of simplicity, in this work I've separated these three threads but in reality they of course existed in a complex, contextualized and fluid way, weaving throughout these experiences: in order for me to feel free at home, or in the more supportive classes, trusting supportive relationships were necessary and in order for me to feel competent and able to learn in both environments, I needed to feel free to explore and engage with the material as I wished etc. The complexity and lack of linear cause-and-effect in the relationships between these factors made it difficult to work through this section at first, I struggled with where to start and how to engage with the material so closely related and multi-directional but, as I mentioned above, I eventually found a way to let go of the need to express every single nuanced possibility and frame together something that, I hope, stands on its own as another approach for you to access and engage with the material. In order to present you with something coherent and useful, therefore, I have here separated them out and explored each on its own, with some discussion of their inter-relation and overlapping nature.

## Competence/Challenge

My memories of the first portion of my life are dominated with freely chosen activities of varying degree of challenge in which I could display competence. Pursuing activities under my own choosing, free to change, modify or abandon them at will, I experienced a high degree of competence according to my own evaluation. Looking at my early experience of learning subtraction at the kitchen table, for instance, I was wrong several times, attempted to solve the problem myself and eventually learned the correct procedure with assistance from my mother.

Encapsulated in that vignette is a key component of the pedagogical perspective my mom undertook in our homeschooling: individualized experiences in which we were able to set our own terms of success and follow our organic experience of the material to increase our understanding and academic development. I was aware that I got the wrong answers but that was important only within the context of offering feedback on my capability with the specific skill, the wrong answers didn't count against my sense of competence as they didn't matter in any enduring measurement or assessment of my capacity in the subject; I never 'failed' the assignment or subject, mistakes were merely indications that I had not yet mastered the skill and I was able to develop competence in this area by exploring my mistakes and learning to correct them immediately in relation to my understanding of the material rather than getting the sheet back the next day knowing my mistakes had been documented and that my one chance at the assignment had already passed. While younger students in school may not be tested as absolutely as their older peers, eliminating some of the sense of incompetence that can be fostered in more formal testing environments, my mom's broader pedagogical approach lent itself to developing a sense of competence as I was able to explore my learning in a personally relevant manner not only building from my pre-existing individual perspective and understanding but seeking out

new challenges to match what I saw as significant or meaningful (e.g. Bornstein, Haynes, Watson O'Reilly, & Painter, 1996; Carruthers, 2002; Engel, 2005; Harris, 2000; Hutt & Bhavnani, 1972; Lancy, 1996; Nielsen & Christie, 2008; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990; Smith, 2010; Sylva, Roy, & Painter, 1980). My perspective on these experiences is echoed by Csikszentmihalyi and Kleiber (1991), “one can best learn about the possibilities of the self when one feels free to make mistakes” (p. 96); making mistakes without any sense of external consequence therefore fostered not only an organic approach to learning but also a distinct kind of environment in which my early learning occurred.

Looking at less structured academic activities, memorizing the first scene in *Macbeth*, playing King's Quest on the computer, or getting lost in a book of my choosing, as a homeschooled child these activities were freely chosen within the social context of the home-learning setting and reflected a degree of competence in that I was able to choose the degree of difficulty I faced, maximizing challenges without overstepping the bounds of my competence, and emerging victorious in the end according to my own measurement of success, whatever organic desire had driven me to take up the activity. The freedom to choose activities based on intrinsic motivations meant that my measurement of success was based on what it was that sparked my interest at first: I wanted to be a part of my brother's plan about the play so I learned some lines, I wanted to find out how the story ended in the computer game so I struggled through the challenges and asked for help when I felt I needed it, I liked the look of a book at the library so I started reading it. How these activities ended, that we gave up the play idea, that we sometimes called our friend for 'cheats' or that I abandoned a boring book part way through, didn't matter because I'd already satisfied my driving desire, fulfilling a sense of completion and competence with the activity because there was no other externally driven goal that couldn't be

renegotiated or revisited. No one was telling me we'd failed in our theatre production or that I didn't finish the book and was therefore somehow less accomplished as a reader. In the case of the game, yes, my mom discouraged quickly jumping for help but when we were truly frustrated she encouraged us to seek out a solution to that frustration rather than pointing out a failure on our part.

This revelation comes at no surprise to anyone familiar who read my snapshots, I would assume, but it answers part of what I was asking in my first question: how did the experiential traits impact my experiences. Looking through that lens of leisure studies has helped frame my engagement and interest in pretty much whatever I was doing most of the time, supporting the more anecdotal beliefs expressed by alternative education advocates such as Holt (1967) and Neill (1992), upon whose work my mother based much of our homeschooling 'program': that children will learn at their own pace, in their own way, fulfilling natural desires to learn and grow without externalized evaluation and measurement necessary to prove objective competence or capacity.

In my reflection on how competence was built in my homeschooling experiences, I went back to the literature I'd read on play-based learning and how intrinsically motivated activities result in personal growth and development. Central to the process of learning through play is Vygotsky's (1933) concept of the 'zone of proximal development' in which children play along the division between what they know and what they do not, pushing the limits to their understanding by exploring its boundaries in their play. Similar to the balance of challenge and skill in Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, & Nakamura, 2005), the zone of proximal development is individual to each child and variable in each moment as their attention fluctuates and their skills and knowledge expand with the self-directed nature of play

allowing children to remain in the zone as long as they wish, expanding their areas of competence without crossing into the realm of anxiety brought on by overly demanding challenges. There is research in this area that supports this theory, indicating that imaginative and creative play with objects and others increases a host of developmental processes including problem-solving abilities (e.g. Hutt & Bhavnani, 1972; Lancy, 1996; Sylva et al., 1980). By building from the foundation of their existing competencies and understandings, bridging the space between play researchers and educators, Resnick's (2006a) work is one example of how choice and flexibility lead to competency as his play-material lab at MIT explores intrinsically motivated engagement and how it allows children to explore and discover novel approaches and solutions. Based on the experimental work in his lab and their outreach projects, he has developed three strategies to maximize the chances children will engage their materials in "creative playful and learningful ways" (Resnick, 2006a, p. 198): by making it personal, allowing for "many paths, many styles" (p. 200), and encouraging children to use familiar materials in unfamiliar ways. Looking at his previous work and the findings of his lab, Resnick (2006) stresses that optimal learning, therefore, does not occur when children merely interact with material according to a set curriculum but when they create and invent and actively engage in problem-solving, multi-subject-spanning projects.

To bring this thread back from that semi-tangent, then, I have found, through this reflection; that the flexible and open nature of my experiences in homeschooling allowed me to develop a sense of competence and comfort with learning, exploring and experimenting, necessary for cognitive development.

This kind of learning did not only happen at home in our semi-academic activities. Throughout my childhood I participated in a wide range of leisure programs offered in my

community such as swimming and art lessons, horseback riding, science camps and various educational day programs at libraries and conservation areas. And while the specific content of these programs would have offered me the opportunity to gain specific skills and/or knowledge, it is the participation itself that I want to discuss here. In particular to this discussion, I see both the structure of these programs and their existence within the broader social world as significant. With my mom's ongoing support of my wishes, the difference between my experiences in private at home and in the more public realm of other activities remained relatively autonomous as my participation depended on my choices. It was certainly often a very different experience, especially with regard to my relationship with the adults and the power structures involved, but with the knowledge that at worst I just had to stick it out through just one day until I got home, I don't remember ever feeling exceedingly upset or overwhelmed by those differences. Within these programs I was also offered the chance to make friends outside our family and small circle of homeschooling friends, developing social skills and understanding of social structures, expectations and reciprocity. Both of these factors I see as important developmental processes which worked to support my overall growth and avoid some of the concerns of sheltered homeschooling students mentioned above (e.g. Apple, 2013; Reich, 2002)

Interestingly enough, aside from issues of harsh discipline or disrespect of individual wants and needs, I don't remember being bothered by the structure in these programs. At home I got to do what I wanted, I was free to determine pretty much everything I was going to do throughout the day and at lessons and camps my time was generally structured and predetermined by the program design and/or staff members but I don't remember ever resenting the structure or finding it uncomfortable in and of itself in any way. I would hazard a guess that the fact that the novelty of the activities and the knowledge that each program had a limited

timeframe worked together to increase my interest and decrease any friction that might have occurred between my own desires and the limitations of the program schedule. Patience, empathy and a sense of self, based on my response to the structure were all distinct skills I developed through these public leisure activities.

While the structure itself led to specific skill development, the social side of my participation in public leisure has brought to mind another facet of leisure studies: that of leisure as a public good, a source of developing social capital, citizenship and social contribution (e.g. Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Glover, 2002; Hemingway, 1999; Johnson & McLean, 1994). I'm not looking to engage another whole side of the literature in depth here, but felt I should at least acknowledge the unique role my leisure activities had in this particular side of my development while being schooled at home. In participating in these activities, I would argue that I was able to foster an entirely different set of competences and abilities, seeing myself as a capable, active and responsible member of various communities and social designations, seeing my position as a citizen in those communities and recognizing the contributions required of me as such. By expanding my social world, experiencing different social groupings I was, in this public sphere, able to gain a sense of competency in an entirely different facet of life:

Knowledge of social role-based obligations and expectations makes appropriate social action possible by understanding the norms attaching to social roles. This knowledge is part of a person's social repertoire, enabling her/him to deal with specific aspects of social relations. Knowledge of obligations and expectations attending social roles increases with the degree to which individuals are involved in social structures (Hemingway, 1999, p. 155).

Expanding beyond just the personal skills, Hemingway (1999) also points to leisure's capacity to foster tolerance, trust and connection, all of which he believes increases individual's



democratic social capital, contributing not only to that person's quality of life but that of the broader society as well.

While the debates about these social good features of leisure range over a wide range of topics and opinions, in this paper, I simply want to note that by having access to programs such as minor soccer, day camps and community art classes I, a child from a large family without a great deal of money, was able to access a wide range of experiences and opportunities that would otherwise have been unavailable to me. And while I might not have considered the availability of these options as such back then, as an adult and leisure scholar, I am able to see now how lucky I was and believe that along with my parents' personal political leanings, this early access to recreation through municipal offerings had a not-insignificant impact on my own personal values regarding the importance of access to meaningful leisure for all and my place as a member of a community that cared for its own in at least this small way. These early leisure experiences, therefore, offered me not only the chance for personal growth and development in a personally meaningful and self-directed manner, but also as a citizen and socially aware being, rounding out another area of my education reinforced and supported by my freedom to choose, to determine my engagement and ensure that my motivation and satisfaction in said activities remained high enough to maintain interest and personal investment.

In this manner, I would therefore argue, leisure participation for homeschooled children, in public programs, can offer a helpful opening into other social worlds, exposure to various challenges and the opportunity to foster a sense of civic engagement which could be hampered by more limited or insulated life experiences as home. As we move forward to look at my later years as a homeschooler, I also found that these courses and programs were also a great source of

necessary challenge and excitement as my cognitive skills developed and I became less satisfied with filling my time with my own purely self-directed play-based activities.

As I got older, I was less able to create my own challenges and experienced a degree of angst and disconnection, of boredom and insufficient challenges to further increase my sense of competence. I was still free to follow my own interests and personal motivations but, for whatever reason, felt somewhat stuck and unsure of how to do so. This may have just be personal to me, the onset of early-teenage angst or hormonal mood disruption, but needless to say, I found passion and enjoyment in activities like drama and looking after my younger cousins, new areas of expertise that matched my personal interests. More generally speaking, I would posit that maintaining an unschooled homeschooling pedagogy beyond the primary years becomes a more complex balancing act of supplying structure and supports to increase the level of challenge experienced while still offering sufficient freedom of choice to maintain the intrinsic nature of the experience. Looking at my slightly later experiences, therefore, I would argue that perhaps more structured supportive environments, ones that can further help older children foster autonomy and competence, could result in greater personal satisfaction (e.g. Guay et al., 2008; Jang et al., 2010). Drawing on the work exploring the presence of flow in schools (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Bassi & Delle Fave, 2011; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Shneider, & Shernoff, 2003), I would say that my later years in homeschooling found me somewhat under-challenged, in need of more concrete projects with some structure and feedback regarding my progress. In this way, school supported my developing intellect and ability by pushing me outside my own comfort zones and offering direct feedback on my progress in doing so.

This is a period of my homeschooling experience that I had previously not fully understood nor, to be honest, upon which I had spent much time reflecting. In this study, I had to

stop and really think about that period of my life and challenge some of the automatic responses I had that lack of structure and direction was the absolute best for me at all ages. This is not to say that I think I would have been happier in a traditional school setting, I think that level of control would have been extremely uncomfortable for me at that age, given that it was a struggle a few years later when I was older, more self-assured and better able to understand my experiences.

Looking to the examples cited in the literature above, I would argue that for older children, ensuring that some structure is available via projects, organized activities and/or other resources, would help them find appropriate levels of challenge in their daily lives, if self-direction and freedom of choice are still present to support other needs and their ability to actually find their own personal optimal level of challenge. Be that as it may, I still found lots of ways to fill my time and fulfill my needs, finding satisfaction in activities like the quest-based games on the computer or the ‘after-school’ drama class, but I am curious as to how I would have reacted to some structure at that time. Would I have been more satisfied? Would I have found it too stifling or limiting? I won’t ever know what my experiences of different settings in childhood would have been like but I would be interested to see further research in this area explore the possibilities with large-scale studies looking at wider range of experiences for a number of different individuals. In particular, I would be interested in exploring how different degrees of structure in homeschooling affect individuals’ feelings of boredom, interest, and challenge as well as comparing those responses to those of peers in more traditional school programs.

How has the fulfillment of those early needs impacted who I am today? I can’t say for sure how this lack of motivational activities affected my personal growth and development because I cannot say what I would have been like if I had grown up in a more controlling

environment, or how my perception of all this would have been different in that case, but it is interesting to think about. I do think that the relationships I had growing up fostered a distinct perspective on my relationships with my teachers when I transitioned into the school environment, however, which I will discuss below. Further individually-focused study into unstructured homeschooling programs such as ours would certainly allow us to explore the question of how immersion in this type of supportive environment impact individuals in the long run and I, for one, would love to see a longitudinal study specifically exploring the sense of competence and engagement with challenge in children raised free from the vast majority of amotivational experiences normally included in North American childhood.

Looking at the early stages of my learning experiences as a whole, I think that an important feature was the integration of learning in my life, it was part of what I did at all times rather than being something set aside for specific times or activities in my day. I was unaware of this aspect of my life until I went to school and suddenly found my daily experiences divided formally, not only separated into subjects but also into free-time and controlled time, learning and non-learning. Obviously no one would argue that we learn nothing outside of school hours but, again returning to our cultural placement of school and its structure, I believe there is an underlying discourse surrounding valued knowledge and skills that identifies learning done in school as what is necessary or important while everything else is considered incidental and attributed less value. This segmentation of our experiences in school is another facet of the experience that I was interested to explore through the leisure scholar lens.

In leisure studies work, there is often a focus on intense, committed and highly active leisure when considering outcomes and benefits (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Stebbins, 2007)), mirroring the division we see in schools with value being placed on ‘productive’ or distinctive

activities as leisure pursuits as opposed to those less clearly delineated and pursued purely for relaxation or pleasure. While some leisure scholars have explored more casual leisure, stressing the importance of relaxation and valuing of intrinsic motivation in order to achieve greater satisfaction and quality of life (e.g. Kleiber, 2000; Leckey & Mannell, 1999; Stebbins, 2010), the segmentation of time at school still emphasizes more serious or committed leisure activities such as sports and art through inclusion in curriculum and dedicated time allotment. Discussing the value of other kinds of leisure experiences, authors have noted benefits such as finding ‘space’ for creative and personal reflection in ‘the pause’ between other active pursuits (Kleiber, 2000) and the development of interpersonal relationships and fostering of creativity (Stebbins, 2010). Personal attitudes derived from values regarding how we spend our time have also been found to impact how we see the importance of self-directed activity and how we see and judge the world around us (Leckey & Mannell, 1999). Looking at examples in leisure literature, therefore, we can see how focusing only on ‘productive’ or specific kinds of activities can limit our overall experiences, stripping away the benefits we gain when allowed to relax and explore materials and activities in our own way, at our own pace.

Delineated classes, isolating subject divisions, external and arbitrary time separation between activities, these factors in school structure, in the segmenting of student life, mean that students are not only unable to follow the course of an interest or activity through changes in subject areas and over time but also that clear messages are sent regarding the importance of different subjects, impacting our basic value-based conceptualization of knowledge, skills and fields of study. Breaking down segmentation of learning time would not only create space for personal reflection, creativity and personal satisfaction but also allow for more flexible experiences and deeper engagement with the work, as seen in the literature addressing play-

based learning, by allowing for organic, personalized, open-ended and naturally completed (as opposed to those truncated by external scheduling or predetermined end-points) experiences which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter (e.g., Mitra, 2003; Resnick, 2006b).

The issue of time-segmentation in school is additionally complicated by its link with knowledge, skill, competence and development. Segregation of children's time into 'schooled-time' and 'unschooled-time', when coupled with the credentialist societal acceptance of school as the setting for learning the useful and relevant skills and knowledge needed by citizens, results in the legitimating and validating of the body of knowledge and the skills valued and measured by school (Meyer, 1977; Stevens et al., 2005). As such, the current model of the modern school system holds control over both knowledge, through the definition and presentation of the collectively agreed upon body of knowledge and definition of reality, and personnel, through the categorization and definition of different credentials needed for different types of work (Meyer, 1977).

A side effect of this categorization of knowledge and the demonstration of its acquisition results in limited, linear and right/wrong oriented measurements of capacity and competence in that it creates a much more dichotomous sense of competency based on marks received in each class, resulting in a distinct perspective on being good/bad at some entire subjects, rather than developing a more specific understanding of individual skills, talents and limitations. Aside from political issues regarding the controlling of knowledge and information, this type of segmentation of knowledge and skills into externally determined subjects has been challenged on the grounds that children learn better with a more 'comparative understanding of school subjects' (Kerr, Fujiyama, & Campano, 2002) that would allow them to connect ideas and explore a broader scope of topics, expanding our definition of competence and capacity development. A

comparative understanding and use of knowledge, as can be found in more flexible, open-ended, learning settings such as my homeschooling experience would also be more beneficial in our post-modern age where creativity, flexibility and application of knowledge appears to be so much more important.

In this way, our conceptualization of school mirrors much of our cultural perspective on the division between work and leisure with school being cited as preparation for work, not only in terms of academic skills but also the social contexts of completing tasks you have no interest in nor in which you find any personal meaning. And yet, in my experience as a child, integrated holistic learning happened on a daily basis resulting in no loss of development or increase of negative outcomes later in life, not to mention the increased sense of engagement and personal fulfilment possible when all of our personal needs are met with regard to important factors such as competence and self-determination.

This lack of segmentation in my early learning experiences related to my sense of competence as I saw my life in a more holistic manner, with different activities delineated but as all belonging to a much broader whole. I may have been more skilled or at ease in some activities than in others but I didn't see my abilities as concretely divided between learning/valid or otherwise. I had a general idea of some skills being specifically important for later life, and that schools certainly emphasized certain skills and subjects, but their importance in my life was not externally determined, driven or dictated. I'm struggling here, to describe the difference I felt in my engagement with the integrated and organic learning in my homeschooling compared to the externally focused experiences in school. The difference was one of the entire experience, of cohesion and relation between my activities, the sense of life itself as a more general experience rather than segmented episodes. Self-determined activity and the absence of abstract or absolute

external evaluations, pass/fail testing and subject segmentation all together, therefore, helped shape my general sense of competence as a homeschooled child, allowing me to explore, play and move through my learning experiences at my own pace, in my own way, responding to my own curiosity.

Looking at competence in particular, I think the nature of school can both support and restrict the development of a sense of competence. It is supported through concrete measurement of progress, clearly stated curricular goals and ongoing evaluation, presuming a student displays competency in the subjects being evaluated. For me, school also marked a period of developing my competencies in other areas as I became more independent, spent the majority of my time with people other than my family and was faced with a host of ‘real life’ challenges to be dealt with (i.e. forgotten gym clothes, anti-social peers, time management etc.). In this way, however, any extended day program outside the home would have helped foster this age-appropriate development and I don’t see our school structure as assisting in this competence in a specific manner. Ironically enough, in contrast to fostering these life skills, how we construct school and talk about progress and development can also undermine feelings of competence. Our sociocultural isomorphic conceptions of school rely heavily on right/wrong answers, tests and earning marks. Not only can a poor mark send a clear message of incompetence, but the nature of memorizing for a test when you have no clue what will be asked can foster a feeling of incompetence. At least, it did for me.

I was a good reader who read consciously and was more than happy to think critically about what I’d read and discuss my thoughts with others (if you’ve met me you probably know the real trick is getting me to shut up about what I’ve read). And yet, because I never knew what specific details the teacher was going to ask about in order to test whether we’d done the



readings or not, I struggled with my English homework in terms of motivation, interest and enjoyment. Those tests, an extension of our need to measure progress so specifically, and perhaps a requirement given the amotivational state many students find themselves in regarding school work, were not really measuring deeper literacy skills or critical thinking; they measured my ability to memorize facts, certainly not a new insight into much of our curricular focus but an important facet of this exploration, and more importantly, to somehow know the exact facts my teacher would be expecting me to know, regardless of the presence of a multitude of options, the totality of which I could not possibly retain nor express in a quiz or test.

While English also included broader expressions of learning such as writing papers, in other subjects this type of learning dominated much of our class time. Science and social science classes relied heavily on memorization and hoping you knew the answers to the questions the teachers chose to ask in the tests. The uncertainty of what would be asked always added to my anxiety over studying because you couldn't possibly memorize everything and they couldn't possibly ask you about everything and, as such, there was always an element of uncertainty no matter how hard you studied or how well you understood the basic principles of the material. In this way, our basic structures of evaluation, the focal point of school-based education, are centred around something in which no one can be completely competent: studying the right material based on what the teacher happens to include on a test. Even on assignments that weren't tests and didn't require memorization I still remember being uncertain as to what the teacher was looking for. Earning marks by getting the 'right' answer, rather than discussing my understanding or showing I can apply my knowledge in a meaningful way to solve a problem, meant that I could also get it wrong, resting my competency in the activity on answer-giving rather than more personal understanding. This process undermined my sense of autonomy in my learning, as my

success/failure was reliant on external factors outside my control, centering the learning experience on how to achieve marks rather than what I thought about the material or what I could do with it on my own.

While I found several studies looking at the impact of teacher attitudes and behaviours on motivation (e.g., Jang et al., 2010; Roth, Kanat-Maymon, & Bibi, 2011), I found very little reflection on the basic processes of our traditional school models. The shared perspective on how teachers can support students is typified by statements such as pointing out that autonomy,

...can be supported by teachers' minimizing the salience of evaluative pressure and any sense of coercion in the classroom, as well as by maximizing students' perceptions of having a voice and choice in those academic activities in which they are engaged (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p. 139).

These studies acknowledge the impact of evaluative measures on personal experience but, for the most part, do not call it into the realm of potential improvements to be made. In my school experiences, however, a dichotomy was created between passing and failing in a subject or task, a distinct difference from my early experiences in which mistakes were something to be learned from, a part of the natural learning process to be embraced and explored rather than an end product of an attempt. Evaluation itself is not a bad idea, indeed, Csikszentmihalyi cites feedback as a component of flow conducive environments (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005), linked directly to intrinsic motivation and facilitating optimal experiences (as seen in my progress with the subtraction questions in my homeschooling snapshot), but stresses that while direct feedback is helpful for the individual to understand his/her success and progress with a task, externalized, delayed and broad-scope evaluation does not support flow experiences in the classroom as it places value on future rewards and externalized praise rather than personal enjoyment and satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In this way, future research involving how basic principles

of our schooling system impact student lived experiences could reveal a whole new area of influence and room to explore alternatives.

Relating this back to my earlier discussion of school as a social institution, given our use of the institution for credentialing, sorting and measuring certain abilities (e.g., Beattie, 2002; Bidwell, 2001; Brown, 2001), this facet of the school experience appears relatively unlikely to change in the near future. In order to change to a more project-based model in which multiple answers and approaches are considered valid we would have to embrace a much more fluid marking system, or at the very least, one that found a way to track other, more process-driven, factors such as creativity, dedication or engagement rather than specific objective content-based outcomes. Not an impossible goal, but one that would require a distinct shift in our perception regarding some of the core practices of school, challenging its isomorphism and our cultural beliefs regarding learning and development that have grown up around it.

Future research exploring alternative programs or projects such as Mitra's (2003; 2005; 2010) work with minimally invasive education, especially when coupled with a focus on the locus of student motivation, could explore possibilities for how this type of evaluation could work in a broader public system. To that end, I suppose you would have to look at the degree of competence and autonomy felt by students in more project-based courses in the traditional system to see if my experiences in certain classes are reflective of others' experiences as well. It is possible that other elements of the institution and its program could still create similar feelings of uncertainty or incompetence, keeping students focused on more work-like facets of their experiences.

## **Sense of freedom**

In looking at my homeschooling experiences, helping to flesh out some of the processes and my reactions to various external outcomes, we can see the subjective, fluid and personal experiences discussed widely in leisure studies. Looking towards the ‘controlled’ or extrinsically motivated side of the spectrum, in choosing to do math homework or play sports I often participated because of a fear of missing out on something important or falling behind and running into difficulties later in life. Fear of these ‘punishments’ resulted in me, at times, modifying my desired behaviour in favour of participating, resulting in experiences that were less personally meaningful and enjoyable during which I felt more anxiety and/or boredom (e.g., (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Weissinger, Caldwell, & Bandalos, 1992). At other times, my participation felt more autonomous and was more related to my own sense of identity and personal goals such as developing my own skills or being someone who completed a certain task, fostering a deeper sense of personal control and meaning. In these instances, the freedom to determine how I engaged in these activities helped to move them closer to internal motivation; options such as choosing not to go to a game, or to do only a few math questions, made my actual participation less controlled, allowing for a feeling of autonomy and self-direction despite the fact that my participation as a whole was more externally driven.

It is interesting to note that I cannot remember a single completely externally controlled activity in my homeschooling experience. There were certainly events such as having to go with my mom to pick up my aunt from work or waiting through a siblings’ soccer game that were devoid of any choice or personal meaning but I cannot remember participating actively in any activity in which I was not in some way choosing to participate. Even so-called ‘normal’

everyday kid stuff like having to join the family at the dinner table or complete specific chores were ultimately our decision, both of which we all chose not to do on different occasions without fear of reprisal or punishment. In the cases of the isolated events in which I had no choice but to be a part of to some degree, for instance going to pick up my aunt because there was no other adult at home, I had choice over how I participated (i.e. bring a book to read or play with a sibling in the car) and I was always aware that the lack of control I held was directly related to concrete situational conditions; I understood why I had no choice over the matter and don't remember resenting them even when I was unhappy about the circumstance.

Is this a case of rose-coloured glasses? Perhaps. But thinking about how my mom handled situations and that I have no recollection of her ever arbitrarily exercising her power as the adult in the situation, nor of her making absolute authority statements unrelated to realistic concerns for our safety and wellbeing, makes me believe this perspective on my memory to be true. I saw activities I didn't enjoy at camp to still be somewhat determined by my choice to be there in the first place, and I knew that I had the freedom to not return should I choose to stay home and discontinue my participation.

In 'Small town suburbia' and 'Camp and swimming lessons', I talk about following rules regarding safety and how this felt like an automatic action to me, that it made sense to listen to safety rules but that I didn't see it as 'behaving' or 'being good' for their own sake. And, initially, I had trouble reconciling how I felt about these rules with my cognitive understanding of their degree of control over my actions: I didn't feel constricted or repressed by them and yet they were definitely to be followed at all times. These experiences reflect an internalization of external structures and my choice to follow the rules entered around the fact that I understood them to be put in place to protect me and that, therefore, they are aligned with my own goals to

remain safe and unharmed. My sense of relatedness to the adults in my life fostered a respect for their views regarding safety concerns, allowing me to integrate their restrictions into my own sense of what I should do rather than simply seeing them as things I was not allowed to do. My relative autonomy in both my life broadly speaking and in my choice to participate in specific activities like swimming lessons, also presumably contributed to this integration and sense of ownership over these behaviours (e.g., Guay, Ratelle, & Chanal, 2008; Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2010).

The combined lack of punishment or absolute adult control over my actions was certainly a significant facet of my homeschooling experience as a child. When one of us did something ‘against the rules’ such as striking a sibling or being hurtful in some other way, we were not punished but engaged in a discussion regarding our actions, exploring why we did what we did and discussing better alternatives to use in the future. On rare occasions we were told we had to stay with an adult and not play with the other children because they were still upset over our actions but my memory of these instances with my siblings and myself are very few and far between. My autonomy, as I remember it, therefore, was relatively complete for most of the day, with any limitations or restrictions to it always associated with natural logical consequences, resulting in both the freedom to choose my action and the awareness that the potential outcomes were mine to determine. In this way it was easy to determine if the goals of a specific activity matched my own or not. In the instance where I quit the Monopoly game, I recognized that my brother would be angry with me but my need to avoid his displeasure did not supersede my own discomfort and need to move on to a new activity. Looking through this theoretical lens, therefore, I would argue that my experience of the homeschooled learning setting was characterized by a high degree of freedom, choice and intrinsically motivated activities, fostering

a supportive and challenging environment resulting in a distinct experience of well-being and growth based on the benefits to be found in activities possessing these specific traits.

Looking out from this personal experience back to the literature, as I pointed out above, leisure scholars have argued for decades that certain traits such as freedom of choice, personal satisfaction, personal agency and, intrinsic, creativity and optimal self-actualizing ‘flow’-like experiences all of which have been widely studied to result in various personal benefits such as identity formation, satisfaction, pleasure, development and improved quality of life (Kleiber, Mannell, & Walker, 2011). In developing such a self-directed environment my mom was able to follow the paths of other alternative educators (Greenberg, 1995; Holt, 1967; Neill, 1962), allowing us the benefits of individualized learning as well as the benefits of self-directed experiences in and of themselves.

As I discussed above in the literature review, Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow’ state can offer students a deeper engagement with material and, broadly speaking, increased satisfaction and growth in their learning (e.g., Bassi & Delle Fave, 2011; Bassi, Steca, Delle Fave, & Caprara, 2006; Kristjánsson, 2013; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). The experiential traits emphasized in these ‘alternative’ programs mirrored a great deal of what I experienced in my homeschooling such as lack of significance placed on marks, student-driven projects, and emotionally supportive, individualized programming that allows for a balance of challenge and skill etc., answering part of my curiosity about looking at my experiences through the leisure studies lens: freedom most definitely played a distinct role in how I experienced learning in my ‘primary’ school years.

When it came to examining my high school experiences I already knew that that while a great many instances highlighted externally driven motivations, there were several internally

driven experiences in my memories. What I didn't know was what I would find when I began pulling apart both types of experiences and asking myself what were the deeper issues at play in the different incidents. My initial personal reflections on how and why I felt more engaged and personally invested in some learning experiences in school were echoed almost directly in my readings of leisure research and how individual perceptions of activities impact engagement and personal investment (e.g., Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Martin, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stebbins, 2004; Zuzanek, 2004; Barnett, 2005; Dattilo & Williams, 2012; Dupuis & Gillies, 2014; Kleiber & Linde, 2014; Weissinger, Caldwell, & Bandalos, 1992). Our ability to integrate externally driven experiences and experience more personal meaning in them is not a new idea to me but being able to discuss it concretely here while trying to explain how I felt about the differences, a true test of any understanding, was one of the outcomes for which I was hoping when I undertook this work.

This sense of lack of engagement or alienation was probably the most significant feeling I had when writing about these two learning environments. It's hard to explain it here to you so I hope I conveyed some of what I felt in the snapshots, or that you were able to relate to them and understand what I'm talking about based on your own experiences. In working through this reflection portion of the work I was able to define and discuss the cause of this alienation from a psychological background but what was not included in that material was the emotional impact: the anxiety I felt over struggling with material, the lack of enjoyment in activities I probably would have otherwise liked, and the frustration over having to complete material exactly the way a teacher wanted it rather than satisfying my own curiosity. I hope my narrative work in the previous chapter has shared some of these emotional experiences with you. Further qualitative research that looks to explore students' current lived experience in these different settings,



focusing on evocative, emotional reactions rather than more quantitative measures, would expand upon this seriously neglected area of research. While deeply reflexive personal accounts may be beyond most children's expressive capacity, other techniques such as photo-elicitation (having participants take personally meaningful photographs relating to the topic and then discuss their meaning with researchers) can help them tell their own stories within research (Glover, Stewart, & Gladdys, 2008; Truong & Mahon, 2012), as, "...by placing cameras in the hands of people, a facilitator or researcher can gain insights into people's lived experiences, which were previously overlooked, rejected, or silenced. The photograph's narrative becomes a participatory site for wider storytelling, community discussion, and action" (Singhal, Harter, Chitnis, & Sharma, 2007, p. 217).

More specifically in my own experiences, with regard to the matter of analyzing my alienation, in classes where I felt more autonomy and choice I was more engaged, less anxious over marks, and able to work with the material in a deeper, more meaningful manner. One would expect this kind of reaction in subjects I enjoyed more intrinsically anyway (i.e. photography and English) but as seen in the upper year math class (when the teacher asked me to redo two questions, supporting my needs more directly and making me feel more competent), and the tech lab class (where my partner and I were given the autonomy to solve different problems as creatively as we chose), those subjects were not topics in which I was personally interested and yet I found myself more relaxed and interested in the work. My broader experiences, thus, align closely with the leisure literature exploring the benefits of leisure-like traits such as freedom of choice, and intrinsically motivated activities (e.g., Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Martin, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stebbins, 2004; Zuzanek, 2004; Barnett, 2005; Dattilo & Williams, 2012; Dupuis & Gillies, 2014; Kleiber & Linde, 2014; Weissinger, Caldwell, & Bandalos, 1992)

Stepping back to look at how environmental factors such as teachers can influence student's motivations, some research has found that when combined with autonomy supportive behaviours, the degree of positive structure teachers offered could support more intrinsic motivation, higher levels of engagement and better outcomes from their students (Jang et al., 2010). Separating support from control as a feature of the learning environment that included clear-cut goals, organized activities framed in a broader context, strong guidance, constructive feedback that informed competence, and work relevant to the students, this study found that this type of structure improved students' experiences in the classroom. In my reading of it, what this study found was that certain structures supported students' needs for freedom, choice and social support, allowing them to be more personally engaged in the material and achieve a deeper involvement with their material. In terms of fostering more leisure-like traits in our schools, I think the impact of teachers' approaches is a key factor that warrants further exploration in future research.

Running counter to the lack of structure in my homeschooling environment, this kind of positive structure and external guidance is something I've now come to realize I valued in my high school experiences. Structure like this pushed me to work outside the bounds of my initial understanding and comfort zone without causing undue stress or worry over marks. After reflecting on it, this finding sounded intuitive to me but of particular interest was the need for clear goals and organized activity, an extension of the lack of which is what I'm discussing in terms of much of our coursework. No matter how clear a teacher was, in some classes I found there was usually still a degree of subjectivity and/or uncertainty regarding what s/he would ask/look for in marked components of traditional schoolwork. This meant there was a significant part of my learning activities in which I could only feel so competent or able to control in

traditional marking schemes and approaches to measuring learning, keeping me focused on extrinsic, work-like features such as long-term impacts, rewards/punishment and the impact of my marks on my projected success in life.

The traditional school model of right/wrong answers and evaluation not only can foster a sense of incompetence and uncertainty but also severely limits the freedom with which a student may engage the material being studied, as I mentioned earlier. In contrast to our exploratory learning at home, at school I was required to follow a specifically dictated course of learning, dominated by linear rather than flexible and creative progress. This lack of autonomy in how I engaged with the material affected my experiences in many ways, clearly, but when looking at the experience of learning in this type of setting, the biggest impact I felt was a marked sense of alienation from the daily activities I had to complete. This alienation and detachment from activities is found in controlled environments/experiences (e.g., Gottfried et al., 2005; Guay et al., 2008; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve & Jang, 2006), emphasizing the relationship between extrinsically driven activities and decreased creativity, happiness, and satisfaction, higher responses of negative affect and generally less productive output.

One way to deal with the negative impact of this lack of control is to address the matter of our overall goals in school. Intrinsic goals such as those that “are satisfying in their own right and... provide direct satisfaction of basic psychological needs” (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006, p. 23), as opposed to those that are motivated by other external factors such as rewards and praise or future benefits such as increased income or prestigious careers, can have a significant impact on our experiences. As with intrinsically motivated activities themselves, intrinsic goals have been found to be related with increased well-being, satisfaction, and engagement, while external goals result in the exact opposite (e.g., Cohen, 2008; Piko & Keresztes, 2006; Sebire, Standage,

& Vansteenkiste, 2009; Seghers, Vissers, Rutten, Decroos, & Boen, 2014; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). With a cultural emphasis on the importance of grades and degrees as opposed to learning and personal development, these external goals loom large in our school experiences, bringing us back to the influence of how we achieve marks and the degree of control we have over our success in this area.

Within the structures of high school I exercised as much choice as I could particularly in selecting courses based on who was teaching specific classes and taking classes not required simply because they interested me. In taking control of which courses I took, I now realize, I found relief from the pressure of the inherent institutional control and was able to build my daily experiences around enjoyable situations. That sense of ownership and desire to determine my own course of study was, as noted in the snapshot describing my interactions with my guidance counsellor, something seen as strange to most of my friends, as was their reaction to me.

In the case of taking extra English credits in my final two years I was thrilled to be studying material I was interested in and gave no thought to the fact that the credits wouldn't count. Looking back at those classes, I remember being distinctly involved in the work, throwing myself into the more challenging material of the OAC level classes and relishing the independent study portion of each class. While I sought out this type of choice and followed my heart off the regular path of diploma requirements, it was not something encouraged by the institutional system. But what if it was?

What if we approached schooling the way we approach selecting leisure activities, looking at our strengths and what we enjoy? Some core material and required skill development aside, what if in high school we made a point of encouraging students to follow their passions and pursue their abilities in a more flexible, involved, and direct manner instead of allocating

choice to a single elective credit each year? Could we ensure that they still develop and grow intellectually while meeting personal needs for autonomy, choice and personal meaning? Could we thereby increase student enjoyment and personal benefit (e.g., Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Martin, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stebbins, 2004; Zuzanek, 2004) within the structural limitations of school? I think that this type of approach could not only result in more engaged students but in fostering value for their own experiences, bringing the sociocultural division between work and leisure closer, resulting in a host of other benefits as seen in the leisure literature cited throughout this paper. To Csikszentmihalyi and Kleiber (1991), “When school is active and involving, and thereby flow-producing, it is doing its job-maximizing children’s investment of attention in skills that will be important to their futures and to the community” (p. 98).

This is not to say that I see this as a ‘magic bullet’ solution that won’t pose its own problems. Leisure time and activities often associated with leisure can be related to less desirable, anti-social and/or harmful behaviour in teens (e.g., Cullen, 2011; Glover, 2003; Miller et al., 2014; Wegner, 2011) but building from the leisure studies literature that has explored leisure education and promotion of healthy and personally meaningful leisure pursuits by supporting self determination and autonomy (e.g., Barnett, 2005; Dattilo & Williams, 2012; Dupuis & Gillies, 2014; Kleiber & Linde, 2014; Weissinger, Caldwell, & Bandalos, 1992) I believe that programs based on personally meaningful and individually interesting projects could be able to increase student motivation and engagement while avoiding some of the negative outcomes and aspects of adolescent leisure experiences. This approach may actually help support teens in their leisure as well as their schooling as it would support values of personal attachment

and investment in activity while working against acceptance of boredom or lack of interesting challenges in their lives.

### **Relationships with adults**

In my early education, my mom's focus on what I wanted and trust in my ability to make choices that supported my own learning fostered a social atmosphere in which following my own interests was not only allowed but supported and valued in our relationship; in this way a positive alignment was maintained between my own needs and the expectations of those around me, resulting in no need to choose between the two. The deep connection between her pedagogical stance and an enduring trust in our ability to learn and develop without structure or external motivations is something I had not put a great deal of thought into until working on this project. It seems obvious now but at the time I had not thought about the issue of trust and relationships in and of themselves.

Building from her readings of Neill (1962; 1970) and Holt (1967; 1970) and similar authors, she believed in our ability to learn and the natural process of development in unstructured environments and, as such, I trusted in my freedom to choose my activities based on what I wanted to do, trusted in my own development centering around intrinsic drives rather than externalized expectations and evaluation. In this way, not only did she allow for autonomy in her lack of exercised control over my daily activities but also actively supported it by shoring up my confidence in the value and importance of following my own internal directions. This trust, therefore, gave me the freedom to embrace the autonomy that was available, trusting in myself because of the trust she placed in my abilities. My insights into this facet of my experiences came after writing the snapshot about getting stuck in the tree. That was a story that just flowed

out of me one day when I sat down to write. When it was finished I looked at it and thought ‘that doesn’t have really anything to do with learning and school or structure and setting’ but it still felt significant and, after reflecting upon it and discussing it with my supervisor, I was surprised to see its significance so clearly as reflecting so much of my childhood experience. Just as she trusted me to be able to climb down from a tree in which I had climbed up, my mom trusted in my ability to learn and was there to support my progress when I needed it but leaving me to my own devices be it working through a math book on my own, choosing what book to read, or for that matter choosing to spend the entire day playing Nintendo.

Our relationship as it relates to our learning and learning experiences, therefore, was built on this fundamental trust, a trust I now see was lacking in most of my experiences in school, or at least was lacking in the basic structural form of most classes (i.e. enforced homework, spoon-fed, linear progression through curriculum, controlled attendance/participation in specific learning experiences). This type of adult-child relationship, I now see, is fundamental in most alternative programs that offer children more self-determination and control over their own learning (e.g., Mitra, 2010; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), necessary for the acquisition of control to the student but also a reflection of the broader pedagogical perspective that requires teachers to lessen their involvement, to become facilitators and supporters rather than directors and instructors or, in worst cases, enforcers. Personal, internally driven learning requires flexible relationships that allow for student exploration but they still must maintain safety in the environment. My mom’s trust in our capacity to learn was reflected in her trust that we would follow rules regarding safety and our actions towards others, and how we were expected to respect others and behave in such a way that it did not interfere with their own freedom. In this way, our relationship maintained an ongoing balance of personal-internally driven actions

coupled with discussion and reflection on how those actions may impact those around us. Her handling of fights or arguments, therefore, centred around discussion and mutual understanding, rather than power and control, allowing us further autonomy and sense of empowerment, contributing to the necessary sense of true freedom and capacity required for self-directed learning.

This deeply seated faith in our natural inclination and ability to learn was a necessary component in our homeschooling life, one which I didn't understand until I was able to explore it in contrast to my experiences in high school. Comparing that trusting and supportive relationship to my relationships with my teachers I was able to see the deeper pedagogical differences and, in turn, gain further insight into how the structures and form of school impacted my relationships there.

In high school, alienation as a consequence of conflict between personal and external needs not only impacted my experience of coursework (as discussed above) but also my relationships with those around me. I entered school somehow assuming that my relationships with my teachers would not be all that different from the relationships I had developed with other adults in my life, indeed with no other experience I could not conceive of any other kind. I understood that they would be enforcing a very different type of structure and was well aware of stereotypical relationships as portrayed in media and how my schooled friends talk about their teachers, but the fundamental differences in how we were expected to relate to each other were not something I could have prepared for, given my limited exposure to those kind of power dynamics in my childhood.

I was not prepared for the conflicting interests of the typical student-teacher relationship, as witnessed in my reaction to my science teacher's handling of the washroom request and our



subsequent conversation. I was not able to understand the somewhat antagonistic relationship that I now see as one fundamentally grounded in the conflict between needs inherent in the traditional school program: teachers are responsible for ensuring that students complete work in which the students are neither personally invested nor intrinsically motivated. This conflict restricts student autonomy, as I have discussed above, but also impacts motivation by placing students in a state of constant conflict between their own needs and those of their teachers; the force of their need to feel connected to- and in tune with- those around them in direct conflict with their need to seek out personally meaningful, interesting and challenging activity.

It was in the classes of teachers with whom I felt a distinct alignment that I felt the most engaged and interested in my work. In the tech lab where our desire to explore the material ourselves and play with what we were learning was exactly what we were supposed to be doing I found myself much more interested in things like pneumatics and gear ratios than I ever would have expected. In the history class where I knew the teacher would enjoy our enthusiastic, if somewhat off topic, presentation I put in more time on assignments than was strictly necessary. My engagement with the assignments in my grade ten English class was much more involved knowing that my teacher was interested in hearing what I thought, not just proving I understood the material. This type of relationship experience is one part of my high school career that I was particularly interested in exploring in this work: I know autonomy-supportive and self-directed assignments were more fun but what else impacted my engagement and experience of learning in school? And while relationships obviously impact experience, by exploring this facet of those relationships, how my desire to feel related and connected to the adults around me impacted my learning experiences, I have gained a new insight into the broader issues at play.

Prior to this reflection I would have said that the teachers I liked, and in whose classes I felt the most involved in my studies, were the respectful ones who were friendly and supportive rather than controlling but there my understanding stopped. Looking through the leisure studies lens, however, I have been able to unpack those experiences further, understanding that their expectations, demands and perspective on their own roles shaped my motivation and engagement. To put it bluntly, when my teachers valued my experiences and trusted my ability to explore the material I was free to do so, resulting in self-directed learning enhanced by a higher degree of integrated and/or internal motivation, tapping into that wonderful human capacity outlined in literature such as that exploring flow theory. When they focused on marks, testing my completion of work and answer-giving, I was forced to choose between my own needs and theirs, resulting in learning experiences characterized by alienation, stress and anxiety/boredom depending on the specific situation.

There were also teachers in the middle of this spectrum, my relationships with whom I've never quite been able to categorize, teachers who were nice or friendly and yet I didn't feel as excited to work with. Placing this framework over my experiences, I can see that while many of them maintained positive social relationship with their students, their approaches to classwork remained controlling and externalized, resulting in a deeper conflict in the relationship. On the other side of that coin, however, there were also teachers with whom I never felt a personal connection and yet remained engaged in their classes due to more expansive projects or opportunities to be creative. I wish there was room in this project for me to show you these relationships in narrative form but I trust that you will be able to relate to these descriptions and reflect on your own experiences with teachers using this framework as well.

At the centre of these relationship, I believe lies the issue that I was not trusted to act in my own best interest, nor to manage my own progress, as seen in the snapshot of my science class (the teacher's assumption that we were wasting class time with bathroom trips), my grade nine English teacher's need to test whether we'd read the material or not, and the different perspectives of the two teachers on allowing students to work outside the classroom (the female teacher's perspective being far and away the more common reaction from the majority of my teachers). In sharp contrast to my mom's trust in our abilities and desires, I was suddenly faced with teachers who assumed I wouldn't want to learn or, at best, that they had to enforce my engagement with the material. In many cases they weren't wrong and I wouldn't have completed a worksheet or memorized a collection of random facts without the threat of a looming exam, but this approach took away my personal responsibility and sense of internal direction with regard to these subjects. The pedagogical difference in these perspectives resulted in specific differences in my daily life, as seen in the snapshots, but also impacted me in a deeper manner by supporting/undermining my locus of motivation.

When I first wrote the snapshot discussing my choice not to stand for *Oh Canada* and the teacher's haranguing of the student in the hallway I seriously debated their inclusion in this paper. Aside from feeling incredibly vulnerable and uncomfortable with sharing these two experiences in particular, I wasn't sure where they fit in the broader narrative and yet, at the same time, they felt like part of this story. And, lo and behold, talking about autonomy and relatedness here, I can see their place. Making choices about courses and doing what I could to determine my daily experiences was one way of controlling my life in a system in which I had very little actual power. While this teacher may have reacted quite strongly to a relatively anti-social behaviour on the part of the student, I wouldn't say it was that surprising or unusual.

Incidents of negative teacher-student interactions, falling somewhere between my science teacher's response to the washroom request and the teacher's response to the student in the hallway, happened on a regular basis at school. In this current paper I am not going to undertake an extensive exploration of power dynamics in schools but am going to discuss it in the context of leisure studies and how I see this ongoing power imbalance impacting daily experiences. In the school environment in which I was required to engage in externally motivated activities for a large portion of my day, my relationship with those in power, those who would determine not only my daily experiences but had a degree of ultimate control over the outcomes of my schoolings and my subsequent ability to attend university etc., are significant in the degree to which they impacted the degree of external motivations. The threat of abuse of power hanging over my head presented a distinct constraint to my freedom, limiting my autonomy and presenting a clear possible consequence for failure to adhere to specific standards. In this way, relationships with teachers characterized by mistrust and/or abuse of power meant that my freedom of choice and sense of self-determination was not only limited by structural factors but also by fear of reprisal and distress. When considered from the perspective of leisure studies, these relationships and the nature of the oligarchical school structure that fostered them/allowed for them, represent a distinct degree of external motivation and constraint, with threat of punishment/discipline adding to the pressures of obtaining rewards, impeding participation and performance (e.g., Albrecht, 2009; Claringbould, Knoppers, & Jacobs, 2014).

In leisure studies work we discuss constraints and barriers to leisure, factors that can influence how individuals perceive experiences and how those perceptions can impact how the individual feels about them (e.g., Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991; Jackson, 1991). By focusing our learning on external expectations and limitations, these teachers who demonstrated

more controlling relationships with students sent a clear message that learning was something external to us, something for which they had to remain responsible, rather than letting us follow our own paths. In fostering these kinds of relationships, these teachers therefore maintained a focus on external goals, eliminating the benefits of more intrinsic or flow-like experiences (as discussed above), shifting the pedagogical focus to what must be learned or mastered rather than what can be explored or discovered.

My curiosity about overlapping leisure literature with my own experiences in school was first sparked when we discussed motivation in my leisure studies classes, looking at work that explored how behaviours changed when rewards were introduced (e.g., DeCharms, 1968; Greene & Lepper, 1974; Lepper & Greene, 1975; Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). Literature like this speaks to how external forces can change and shape our experiences, adding to the arguments of researchers working with children in more flexible learning programs that self-directed, intrinsically motivated work leads to deeper understanding, more creativity and a higher level of engagement with the work (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; Gray, 2011; Resnick, 2006b).

Clearly, teaching is a difficult job and trying to maintain order in a situation which naturally pits students against teachers to some degree, through its forced participation and externalized locus of causality, only makes that job even harder. Societal, personal, institutional, and professional matters have been found to increase teachers' controlling behaviours in the classroom, impacting students' autonomy and, thereby, their degree of engagement as controlling behaviours run counter to those that support autonomy (Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Discussing autonomy supportive behaviour in the classroom, Reeve et al. (2006) describe teachers helping their students, "develop a sense of congruence between their classroom behaviour [sic] and their inner motivational resources (i.e., psychological needs, interests,

preferences, goals, strivings, and values)” (p. 210), as opposed to controlling behaviours which force students to work within a teacher-centric agenda focusing on extrinsic rewards, externally driven student behaviours and specific expectations regarding what students think and feel. Exploring alternatives based on a wide range of studies, Reeve (2009) argues that autonomy supportive environments not only increase student enjoyment but also result in happier and more satisfied teachers. In this way, fostering experiences rich in autonomy, choice, self-directed and intrinsically motivated activities teachers could offer students alternative ways to engage with material and, hopefully, include the benefits of optimal experiences (as I have already discussed above) within their classroom experiences.

Stepping back out to look at the cultural connections of this side of my learning experiences, I keep coming back to cultural stereotypes of teachers that seem to divide between controlling and/or bored/uninspired (a lá Mrs. Krabbapple in *The Simpsons*, or Principal Krupp in the *Captain Underpants* books) to life-affirming outside-the-box-thinking (seen in any number of Hollywood movies spanning the past several decades including, *Dead Poets Society*, *Freedom Writers*, and *To Sir With Love*, and held up in parody in the television show *Community*). According to my perspective on the matter, we see the celebrated and heroic teachers as those who support their students as individuals, ignore certain institutional limitations and foster classroom environments that meet specific needs rather than focus on curricular standards and expectations. And yet, this is not how we see schools, or what we stress as some of the primary components of learning, as witnessed by the value placed on marks, credentialism and traditional school achievement.

I think this gap between two value sets in our social context of school highlights the conflict at root in the institution itself, namely that we know we all need freedom and self-

exploration in our learning and yet are still firmly rooted in the long-standing sociocultural limitations of the institutionalization of learning. Perhaps I am oversimplifying this complicated matter but this conflict is something that feels very present to me in how I see and think about school and my own experiences across all learning settings. On one hand we acknowledge the importance of play and project-based learning emphasizing creative thinking and yet on the other have trouble letting go of old beliefs surrounding the role school plays in our society. This is not to say that I think this is a static and irresolvable problem. I think our school systems have evolved over time and know that many curricula support more independent work and seek to include creative personally meaningful work as best they can. At the heart of it all, however, I believe, still lies a social need for sorting, labelling and marking that will continue to create a conflict between teachers and their students as long as it rests on primarily extrinsically motivated activities.

I am very curious to explore this area further and wonder what we would find if we asked students and teachers to sit down and discuss their relationships within the framework of focusing on student experiences as subjective, contextualized and socially related. Research grounded in the ideas of collective activism and praxis, such as participant action research (PAR) (Wicks, Reason, & Bradbury, 2007), could involve interventions to help negotiate this relationship while other forms of qualitative research could explore the lived experiences of those involved to broaden our understanding of others' experiences.

### ***All together then...***

The most interesting thing, to me, after all of that reflection, was thinking about the nature of school structure and how the impact its form and function, based on societal needs, goals and expectations for the institution, even looking at just these three facets, had on my

everyday experiences. Prior to starting this reflection I had not expected to feel the impact of all this so deeply, to see through my memories not only in my school experiences but in my homeschooling, as I got older and understood our ‘otherness’ more and more, the way school shapes not only what we learn but how we learn and how we engage with the world as learning beings, and how it shapes so much of our lives. Again, I find myself struggling to convey not just the cognitive break down of the specific details but the depth of this impact in my experiences, how it determined not just the superficial details but the deeper values, beliefs and truths embedded in my life and, perhaps most importantly, how it felt to live the experience of that impact; looking at the contrast between my experiences in these two settings, I’ve been able to explore this discursive impact more deeply, seeing how the existence of school as a social institution influences and shapes so many different facets of our lives while also feeling the truth of it, exploring how it was lived. And therein lies the beauty of this autoethnographic process, and its challenge, to be able to hold both, the lived experience and a cognitive exploration of it, at the same time, feeling and thinking, with both lenses focused on the subject at hand.

When looked at more broadly, however, in the sociocultural context, I can’t help but come back to how our isomorphic school model impacts our conceptualization of learning on several levels. Our schools operate within a society that continues to endorse and support them, as evidenced by the ongoing maintenance of these traditional programs and lack of their widespread rejection, as the best option when it comes to preparing children for adulthood, an endorsement that thereby shapes how we think and talk about learning. Other learning may go on elsewhere in a student’s life but if our social constructions tell us that schools teach us the important things we need to know for adult life, they therefore are responsible for the learning that really counts.



The externalized motivations and hierarchical power structures of traditional programs validate certain knowledges and skills within a specific age-related curricular expectation, concretizing and reifying learning within the school model (Meyer, 1977; Stevens et al., 2005). This type of classification and designation of socially valued learning outcomes reinforces a very specific learning style and experience (i.e. externally driven, right/wrong dichotomy based on teachers' perspective) within our social discourse. This model, being largely externally driven, also alienates the student from their own learning experiences, disengaging them from personally meaningful or significant exploration and self-actualization (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Guay et al., 2008; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004), creating a cultural value for 'school learning' that relies on specific knowledge use and presentation, a relatively limited definition of the significant learning activities (those measured and remarked upon in evaluation processes), and designated situations in which this learning occurs.

In contrast, supporting development through creative, project based learning and self-directed discovery, internally directed programs can allow students to integrate their learning activities into their personal meaning-frameworks, not only reaping the benefits of intrinsically motivated activity but also basing their perspective on learning in and of itself as a partial-socioculturally defined phenomena on this type of experience, rather than one characterized by external control. In the several papers discussing his 'Schole Project', Watkins returns to the value of what he and Bond (Watkins & Bond, 2007) call a 'more complex' understanding of leisure, referring to definitions that show increased internalization of leisure through more diversity in relational dimensions, increased flexibility of the definition, the integration of leisure in all aspects of life and more generalized inclusivity in the definition itself. In his other papers, Watkins goes on to argue that those with more complex understandings of leisure as an

experiential state of mind have greater capacity to experience meaningful leisure in various settings and activities throughout their lives (Watkins, 2008; 2013; 2010; Watkins & Bond, 2007). If we were to take this perspective on leisure as a type of experience and apply it to learning in this discussion, framing the learning experience as a state-of-mind in which students can explore and engage with the world around them in various contexts and activities, students with more internally driven understandings of the state, value, and experience of learning would be able to engage in learning in broader contexts throughout the scope of their lives. This type of more open-ended and flexible student-driven learning, as discussed in my literature review above, has been put forward as a beneficial alternative by numerous scholars in the education field (Brown, 1997; Davies & Guppy, 2006; Dorn, 1998; Hall & Dennis, 1969; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). What I think is salient in this work is the intersection of the broad social perspective of leisure studies and this smaller-scale focus of learning outcomes.

Further exploration of these, and other related factors and experiences, in future research would, without a doubt, reveal other insight regarding how they play out in learning environments but for now, I will leave you to let this material sink in, to interpret it, compare it to your own experiences and make of it what you will.

## Chapter 6 (*Conclusion*): “And in the end...”<sup>8</sup>

And here we are, the final leg of this journey. Thank you for sticking with me along the way, I hope it’s been an interesting read for you and that you’ve come to your own thoughts regarding all this overlapping of leisure and work and school and learning and experience. It’s time now, however, for me to leave you with my parting thoughts on all this, turning from my personal experiences and expanding on the sociocultural issues I’ve touched on above, pulling it all together at last.

In looking to my first research question, that of sharing the experiences themselves, I hope that my narrative snapshots have achieved this goal in some small way for you; it is my hope that in reading this you were able to ‘walk a mile’ in my shoes and share in those experiences in a meaningful, evocative way. Your experience of doing so, and your reflection upon that experience, make up the other half of this work and I trust that you’ve used that space to ask your own questions and engage in a dialogue with either my work, your own experiences, and/or related material, and thereby explore this subject matter on your own.

The second research question is a little more complex with regard to wrapping things up and discussing the impact this work has had on my understanding. All in all, I have come to understand these experiences as a wonderful spectrum of shades of grey, as opposed to the more black and white perspective I had at the outset of this project. The liminal spaces between ‘types’ of experiences, the fluid shifting of experiences and the various influences different factors had on my experiences have all furthered my perception of the complexity of lived experience.

Within these grey areas I found many exceptions to previous assumptions and was excited to explore these shifts in my understanding, seeing how different factors played out and

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<sup>8</sup> Lennon-McCartney (1969). The End. On *Abby Road* [Mp3]. London, England: Apple Music.

impacted my experiences in different ways. Exploring the three common traits: competence, freedom and relationships, I was able to flesh out my memories and help understand not only what happened but how and why my experiences occurred as they did, granting me new insight into these matters. With that insight I have expanded my understanding of the role of 'leisure-like' traits in learning environments and how structure can support or hinder meaningful learning depending on the nature of those traits in the experience and I hope that you have too.

In the previous chapter I spoke about the positive aspects of structure and challenge in learning environments and explored the negative impact of controlling, externalized, factors on an individual experiential basis. Stepping back to another perspective, I would like to turn your attention to the current work-life climate in the developed world, contextualizing this project within the adult-world for which our current schools are meant to be preparing their students. Broadly speaking, a shift from being a largely production-oriented to knowledge- and technology-based economic society has been discussed throughout the literature examining play, the sociology of education, and work. Rojek (2004) describes how the modern work-world has continued to evolve with the globalization and decentralization of economic markets resulting in significant destabilizing changes such as: the disappearance of life-long careers and increase in prevalence of shorter-term contract work; an increase in the service- and knowledge-sector but decrease in specific skill-based job market; a shrinking need and emphasis on labour and work ethic but increased call for flexibility, innovation and creative application of skills. Looking ahead, Rojek (2004) describes vastly different employment situations in which individuals cannot count on stable careers and must depend on their own flexibility, creativity and the application of skills in various areas to maintain their livelihood. Largely agreeing with Rojek's (2004) position describing short-term, service- and knowledge-based, contracted, flexible work

settings, many education scholars stress that new work patterns will require new approaches to education in order to effectively prepare for the post-modern<sup>9</sup> work world (e.g., Guile, 2003; McDonald & Hursh, 2006; Morissette, Ostrovsky, & Picot, 2003; Resnick, 2006a; Schlechty, 1990).

Describing a change from the traditional, industrialized model of education, these authors have for decades stressed that the post-modern era will require schools that do not merely pass on information and specialized skills to students but that foster and encourage the creativity, flexibility, independence and application of information the knowledge-based society needs to thrive (e.g., Bell, 1973; Guile, 2003; McDowell, Sanchez, & Jones, 2000; National research council, 2000; Resnick, 2006a; Robinson, 2001; Schlechty, 1990). McDonald and Hursh (2006) summarize much of the arguments in this area with their distinction between ‘training’ and ‘education’, “training is preparation for what is known, education prepares us for what we don’t know yet” (p. 13). Thus, facing a work-world driven by innovation, change and development, surely education, and not training, would be the ideal goal for our schools but would require the adoption of radically different programs.

Integrative programs that foster internally driven experiences by allowing for more freedom of choice and self-directed approaches to problem solving coupled with academic challenges have been suggested by many scholars as potential alternatives to traditional programs (Mitra et al., 2005; Resnick, 2006a; Robinson, 2001; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). Discussing the need for both academic intensity (challenge appropriate to individual skill) and positive emotional response (positive affect, intrinsic motivation and personal investment), Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) discuss several different ‘alternative’ programs that focus

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<sup>9</sup> Post-modern in this context referring to the current era, one seen as chronologically following the modern industrialized era, and not the epistemological/ontological perspective of postmodernism.

on flow-like experiences to maintain optimal student experiences. These ‘flow-conducive’ programs offered varying combinations of distinct challenges and academic rigour while still including autonomy, creativity, student directed activities and lack of letter grades/traditional marking schemes, aligning with much of what I discussed above regarding my own positive learning experiences.

Robinson (2001; 2009) has recently become a popular figure after advocating for years for increased creativity, flexibility and open-ended, multidimensional, projects in all subjects, arguing that creativity and knowledge use is much more important today than knowledge acquisition and traditional testing. Looking at similar learning processes, Mitra has spent over a decade exploring how children learn with minimal supports, to what capacity they can explore material on their own, or with their peers, and how meaningful self-directed work within specific projects can result in distinct learning and growth, finding that children can learn, and learn well, with less direction and more internally driven exploration (e.g., Mitra, 2003, 2010; Mitra et al., 2005; Mitra & Rana, 2001).

The collected results of Mitra’s body of work thus point to the fact that independent learning and working with peers in supportive environments allows children to approach learning from an individualized perspective, developing thinking skills, ability to utilize resources and motivation to learn. In discussing how to utilize this type of work in school programs, Mitra (2010) points to the acceptance of a multiplicity of answers, open-ended exploration of material, a lack of competition or specific correct-answers-equal-good-marks evaluation, and an absence of lectures. Trusting children’s capacity to learn and natural desire and motivation to do so, when discussing the role of teachers in this kind of model Mitra describes one of inspiring or

challenging students, rather than delivering content for their passive consumption, “This is a method where the teacher's role is not to provide content, but to provide the questions” (p. 13).

Bridging the space between play researchers and educators, Resnick (2006a) reports on the findings of his play-material lab at MIT and emphasizes that intrinsically motivated engagement is what allows children to explore and discover novel approaches and solutions. Based on the experimental work in his lab and their outreach projects, he has developed three strategies to maximize the chances children will engage their materials in “creative playful and learningful ways” (Resnick, 2006a, p. 198): by making it personal, allowing for “many paths, many styles” (p. 200), and encouraging children to use familiar materials in unfamiliar ways. Looking at his previous work and the findings of his lab, Resnick (2006) stresses that optimal learning, therefore, does not occur when children merely interact with material according to a set curriculum but when they create and invent and actively engage in problem-solving, multi-subject-spanning projects.

What these proposals all have in common, from my perspective, is that they are emphasizing the importance of the experience of learning, not just the outcomes, immediate or long term. By taking a page from leisure studies and focusing on the broader lived experiences, and how we can try to foster different kinds of experiences, I believe that we could incorporate much more creativity, flexibility and critical thinking into our school programs, fulfilling individual needs and better preparing our students for their adult lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

With regard to the limitations of my research and directions for possible future study, therefore, I would love to see work in this area studying the experience of students and teachers/facilitators in different settings, asking them to explore their own experiences and share them to gain yet another perspective on these issues. Exploring the lived experiences of student-

teacher relationships, alternative program participants and a variety of evaluation methods or approaches to measuring progress could offer us valuable insight into how these different factors play out in the daily lives of those involved.

Research including children's voices, including them in the research process in a meaningful way, would also allow us an entirely different method of engaging these experiences, not only giving us greater insight but also empowering those children in the process to share their experiences and see them as valid and worthy of study. Along that vein I would also dearly love to see students and teachers working together in research to explore their shared experiences and how perspectives may or may not differ depending on the roles of the individuals involved. As I mentioned above, using photo elicitation (e.g., Glover, 2002; Truong & Mahon, 2012) and/or participant action research methods we could explore experiences in learning settings with a focus on collaborative development and improvement rooted in the experiences and wishes of those directly involved (Wicks, Reason, & Bradbury, 2007).

In reflecting on the potential impact for this work and how I see it branching out into other areas of work, I have enjoyed contextualizing it and thinking beyond the current project to the broader intellectual and sociocultural frameworks it exists within. And, in this way, I have achieved my personal goal for this work: exploring my experiences to understand not just what happened in my life but to use them as examples to gain access to broader sociocultural understanding. Being able to contrast not just the structured and unstructured experiences but also to explore the impact of having experienced both, and the transition between them, offered a broader counter-narrative that has, I believe, given us a distinct vantage point from which to view this subject matter. What you will do with this perspective, whether or not you gained any insight or agree with any of my conclusions, I cannot say but I hope that you found the experience



interesting and that, even if only in a small way, it has challenged you to think about the intersection of lived experience and learning and how matters such as competence, freedom and relationships can impact and influence those experiences.

## **Scene: “If we shadows have offended...**

*...Think but this and all be mended”<sup>10</sup>; this is one side of the story, one version told from one vantage point, and in your hands lies the other side, another tale to build from this one. Do you agree with me entirely? Disagree completely? Find yourself somewhere in the middle, wanting to explore your own experiences or reflect more directly on social structures, institutions and perceptions? Regardless of how you responded, the fact that you have means that you are part of finishing that other part, the answer to my call, the reaction as reinforcement, rejection, or resistance, and for that I thank you.*

*At this stage in the journey, at its closing, I am struggling with the bittersweetness of completion: revelling in the final product, the pride of having made it through, and at the same time hesitant to let it go, to say that it is finished and send it away, allowing it to stand on its own without further revision, qualification or explanation. The wonderful frustration of using this kind of writing as its own kind of inquiry means that by the time I write something down, by the time I finish a paragraph, I’ve explored it and thought about it and, most times, have moved forward from that thought into the next. The crux of the struggle being that by the time I finish a section my thoughts on the matter have evolved and shifted and moved on to what else I could think about that subject or what other areas it could relate to, leaving a distinct feeling of incompleteness; there is, literally, always more that I could write about all this. This paradox is something I’ve had to learn to accept and remind myself that this is but one paper, one project, and that all these lovely questions that have sprung from it, all the other ideas I’ve had, and all the new directions in which my imagination wants to fly will have to wait for the next paper, the*

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10 Shakespeare, W. *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, (act V, scene i). This source retrieved online November 1, 2014 from <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/midsummer/full.html>.

*next project. I have to stand back and let it be, no matter how difficult that is, no matter how curious I am about what else there is to say about these matters.*

*And so I stand here with you now, no longer alone in that wild-scape of forest, no longer lost and unsure. This process has opened pathways to many new perspectives for me, asked more questions than it answered, and inspired me to continue my work in this area in a thousand new directions, but at its heart, this portion of the journey is now complete. The trail I forged lies behind me, stretching back through this paper across the landscape and as I look back over it I can revisit moments of its life: moments of doubt, uncertainty, joy, epiphany and elation. The shadows and sunlight are all there, the dead ends and false starts, the easy down hill stretches and the gruelling uphill scrambles.*

*Our arrival here means, I suppose, that in the end my compass held true. At least I think it did. I hope it did. Ultimately, I'll never know if you agree with me on this or not. I believe this work is meaningful and useful and a solid example of how this kind of research can be undertaken. And maybe you do too. Or maybe you don't. But either way, you'll have thought about it, you'll have considered your school experiences and autoethnography and come to a new perspective by reflecting your own thoughts against mine and in that regard, I am going to call this work a success.*

*Without you, without the idea of you out there reading this somewhere, someday, it would have been a much lonelier journey and for that, for your company, inspiration, and silent presence, I thank you, my dear reader.*

*And so here we part ways, my friend. I have finished my portion of this particular journey and leave you to do what you will with yours.*

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## Appendix A: artefacts used in memory work

Name of artefact	Description	Notes (what kind of memories were triggered and/or how I used items)
Writing projects and 'school sheets' from my childhood	Stories, handwriting practice sheets, math work	Examples of one way I spent my time, my interest in fiction, my cognitive/academic growth/development over time
Childhood keepsakes	Old coins, birthday cards, swimming report cards, medals from sports, various trinkets such as figurines	Personal relationships, 'extracurricular' activities, triggered memories of different 'eras' in my childhood based on what I deemed meaningful and wanted to keep
Childhood drawings and artwork	Various items, visual art, handicrafts	Specific projects reminded me of distinct eras etc..
Childhood books	Lord of the flies, little house on the prairie (series), Narnia (series), the Halloween Tree, Babysitters' Club (series)	Flipped through, read portions to trigger memories
Assorted photos	Photos taken throughout my life showing various friends and family members, activities/events, sports team photos, school photos	Memories of houses and other spaces, emotional recall of events/eras, personal relationships, activities
Report cards from high school	Mid-term and final reports	Listing teachers, classes, marks and comments regarding my work, triggered specific memories of relationships, assignments, classrooms, routines etc..
Journals	Personal diaries from high school	Largely negative content, did not explore thoroughly after realizing this slant and remembering that I mostly only wrote when I was upset and didn't want this limited scope of specific memories to take over my narratives

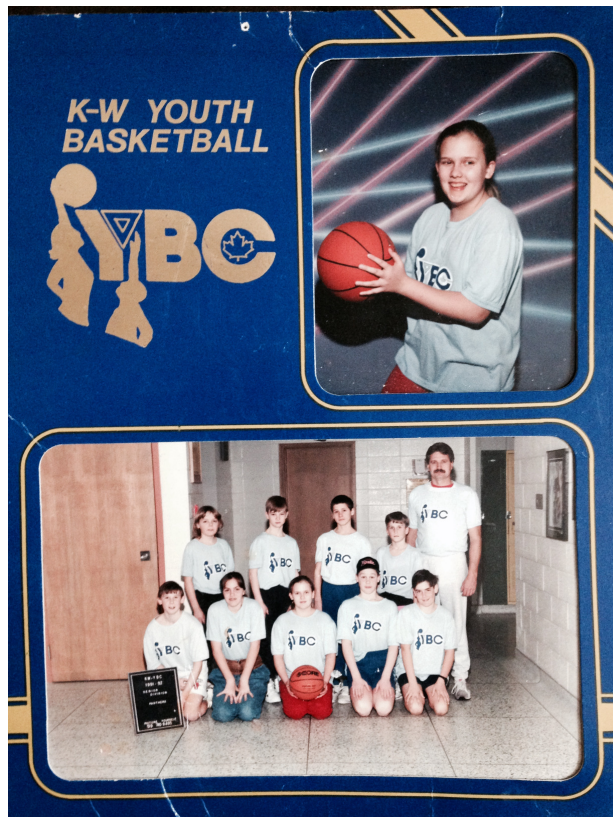
Notes from friends at school	Various notes with artwork and text sent between friends and I during and between classes	Reminders of details regarding specific classes, teachers and events
School assignments	A collection of assignments from various courses across the span of my high school career including both creative and more purely academic content	Reminded me of specific assignments, course content, teachers, marks I received, areas I struggled with, my reactions to assignments, how I felt about different courses/assignments/teachers
Yearbooks	High school yearbooks from each grade including photos of me, my friends, my teachers, my activities and the school itself	Triggered memories: spatial memories of building, emotional reactions to images of faces, experiential memories of events/activities
Scripts	Several scripts from drama performances both prior to and during high school	Revisiting experiences of those performances and my enjoyment of acting, recollection of friends involved, difference between these experiences and others

## Appendix B: photos

Kitchener Minor Softball – 1991  
*(I'm second from the left in the middle row, my mom is on the left in the back row)*



Kitchener-Waterloo Youth Basketball  
1991-1992 *(That's me holding the basketball in the front row)*



Kitchener Minor Soccer  
1992 (*I'm the third girl  
from the left in the back  
row*)

