

Stories in the Border Country

#NoteToSelf

#ComeAsYouAre



*An autoethnographic exploration of
narrative identity and re-storying*

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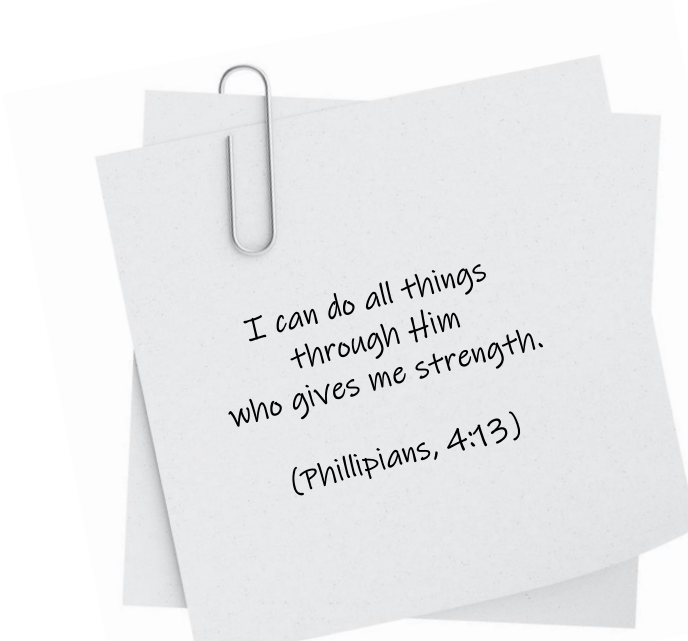
@Thomas, it is not lost on me that the day I finally submitted this thesis was exactly 10 years from the day we brought you to Glasnevin. Thank you for being part of this journey.

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Glossary of Terms

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model (Pre-school)
AMO	Area Medical Officer
AON	Assessment of Need (Disability Act, 2005)
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CDNT	Children's Disability Network Team
HSE	Health Service Executive
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDT	Network Disability Team
OT	Occupational Therapy / Occupational Therapist
PHN	Public Health Nurse
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy / Speech and Language Therapist
SNA	Special Needs Assistant

Abstract

Taking the ontological position that we are storied beings, living storied lives, I tell the story of my visit to border country, a metaphorical place of transformation and opportunity. In an autoethnographical exploration of narrative identity, I use the metaphors of the border country and changing track, in varying turns, a place removed, on the edge, exposed, liminal, transitional, exclusionary, or a place of opportunity, to read the compass, re-direct, re-centre, and re-story. This is a reflexive journey where I am open to being, and am, surprised by the stories told and what the stories tell me.

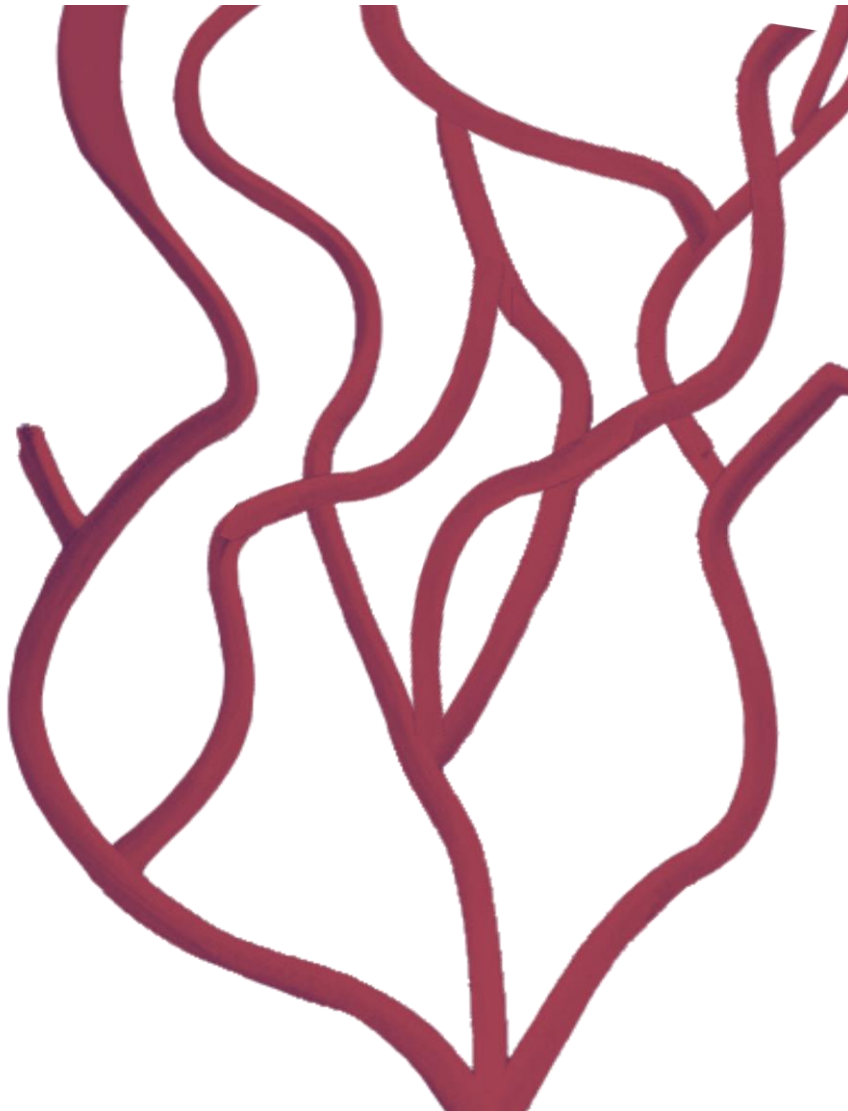


Image 3 Heart-Land Stories Graphic.

Introduction

A story about Stories...

I grew up in Donegal, a border county, in border country. We have an identity all our own up there – not really Northern, our nearest neighbours are in the six counties so that's Northern Ireland, still Ulster but different. Our distant neighbour at the bottom is the northern tip of Connaught... so we're not Northern, definitely not Southern, just a place in and of itself.

I grew up in a small town, living on the main street, the eldest in a family where my parents had public and prominent jobs – always the feeling of difference, spotlight, exposed, on the outside, never quite fitting in.

During the first covid lockdown I had an image of switching tracks, the steel mechanism that changes the direction of a train track so that the train coming later can continue in a different direction. I wondered what it meant but I liked the idea. Then I had a dream...*do the Masters*. And here I am now doing the masters – making it sound like a prophecy fulfilled is disingenuous because when I initially planned the change of track and the further study, I felt it should be a doctorate. I don't remember why, maybe another example of my struggle with accepting good enough or always feeling the need to be better. I don't remember much now from that time four years ago, except in all that reading I did to "wilfully forge ahead" (Romanyshyn, 2007 p.323) and force through my plan for the change of track, one evocative phrase has never left me... "in the border country" (McCormack, 2014 p.167). Even without reading the article then the phrase spoke to me, I didn't know what it meant in the context of that piece but still I understood it.

Border country in this context (McCormack, 2014; Hunt and West, 2012) is the space in adult learning where learning and therapy converge, where ghosts from the past are reawakened, where identities are questioned and risked and where anxiety is a constant threat. This border country can involve the "cracking up" of an old self (Bollas, 1995), as cited in McCormack (2014) as a necessary step in the creative birth of the new, expanded awareness of self and selfhood.

It seems now that the changing tracks message, was the beginning of the call of the border country. I've been at the edge of town for some years now, and the time there in my life, my thoughts, images, and dreams, has been eventful. I morphed from a parent to a parent of an autistic child, a carer, advocate and in the most challenging of many images, a warrior. I became a defacto speech therapist, occupational therapist, psychologist, play therapist and mind-reader, then an unbalanced, unfriendly stranger in a surgical menopausal earthquake while still being a wife, mother, and barely a friend anywhere outside of my thoughts. All the while I've had a professional badge to wear too - a careers practitioner, a project manager, office social media "person", a jack of all trades everywhere and all that goes with that. So, the time came to move out into the new space, venture past the edge of town.

And now, here I am, doing the master's and in my head, I see myself on a wild, empty road, somewhere between Laghey and Pettigo, nothing to see but bog and whin bushes...border country as I know it. (Personal Research Journal, October 2023).

Enter the warrior

I think he was about 10 months old the first time I wondered if something was wrong. I noticed he'd stopped saying the words he had previously said. He was also a little bit harder to figure out, the same things that settled the other kids didn't work on him or needed more before they would work. I couldn't say what I thought it was though...I knew what I thought it was, I literally couldn't say the words though...probably because saying it makes it more real. It was because of what it was, because it felt then that there were such negative connotations associated with autism - like if I named it, I'd open the door to stigma (Goffman, 1955) and he'd be different. It seemed that if I named it then the gorgeous wee boy would be replaced by the stereotype, and he would no longer, or ever, make eye contact or never give me a hug or say I love you. I spent about a year saying, "the A word", before I could "progress" to saying, "spectrum or ASD". Hearing someone say "autistic" was like a knife through my heart...as if that meant he'd be a different wee boy, that he wouldn't love me or show his feelings. It also brought fear, huge fear, of the unknown, of how I could or would be able to help him, of how the system "works" and what his life would be like.

This was the hardest thing I've ever done, putting aside all my fears and desire to put my head in the sand and hope any issues would go away, I had to push forward. There were phone calls, voicemails and phone calls, emails, and forms - and that was before we ever got an appointment for anything. I knew that early intervention was crucial in supporting children like the wee boy, but it seems that in real life, Ireland doesn't do early intervention. Waiting lists for assessments through our public health system are years long (explain the early part of early intervention to me again!). Then if you ever do make it to the top of that list and get an assessment, the waiting lists for actual therapies are even longer (tell me how intervention works again!!). We even have a statutory process in place to look after the needs of our children. Assessment of Need (AON) (Disability Act, 2005).

I often find myself wondering who thought "Special Needs" was the best phrase to use – yes, I'm sure it is better than whatever terms were used before and yes, we can of course say that all our children are special, wonderful kids – but that is nothing to do with anything. I find "special" in this context at best disingenuous and at worst insulting – not because of what it says about the children but if these children, their needs are special and this is how we treat them, what does it say about us as a society, as a country? Special in this content, in my experience, can mean optional extra, something outside of the norm, that we'll absolutely "strive" to get to when resources allow, if resources allow. When we started out on our journey towards therapies and assessment (with a view to getting a diagnosis), we knew that paying for private therapies was the only option...we'd have to take care of him ourselves, no one was coming to help.

On our journey we met almost every letter of the alphabet – PHN, AMO, SLT, OT, HSE, AON, AIM, NCSE, NDT, CDNT – it was overwhelming and I'm familiar with both the education and health sectors, with reports and systems and processes – what must this be like if you don't know how this works, or worse still expect that it works the way you'd expect.

We started our private speech and language and OT appointments, one appointment each week, in three out of every four weeks. There were more forms and waiting lists and letters. There was active worrying and uncertainty and a never-ending feeling of needing to do more to help this wonderful wee boy. Selfishly, my most difficult thought was "will he ever say Mammy?"

When he was three and a half years old, in October 2019, after more phone calls, emails, after appeals and complaints and after more forms, we finally got an assessment which confirmed that the wee boy had autism. That was a very tough day. A friend said to me "he hasn't changed, the wee boy, your wonderful wee boy who went into that assessment, is the same wee boy that came out, nothing has changed with him". In our house, to try to help the wee boy understand

feelings and crying, and his wet cheeks, we say that something "made my tears come." Her words that day finally made my tears come. Yes, nothing had changed with him, but he was different, and my greatest fear was what would that mean for him, for his life, what help would he need, what supports would he need and by now it was abundantly clear that in Ireland there is very little help and very few supports available. The advice is always "be That parent", "whoever shouts the loudest gets heard and gets help". I remember thinking "I don't want to be That parent, I want to be a normal (now I know to say typical) parent, busy with the day-to-day, not in a battle for sanity and survival with the System." It was exhausting. Working full time, coming home to a wee man who was happy to see me, would run to the door but then freeze and stand back because he didn't want to touch me or have me touch him. We had to keep our doors and windows constantly locked because he loved to run and climb and had no sense of danger at all, and if he was in difficulty couldn't call for help. If he was in pain, he couldn't say. I had an A4 sheet with the 40 words he could say - all nouns (verbs are trickier in expressive language). None were Mama.

Every day was a constant cycle of speech and language and OT work, this had to be built into our normal day, sitting beside him watching tv, trying to guess what he might be connecting with, so that I could name it and connect with him, finding ways to climb into his world and look around. To try to map out the territory where he lived, spot the key landmarks that were important to him and use those to build a way for us to exist, to work, to connect with him where he was, with the hope that one day, we might be able to lead him back towards our world.

Somewhere in this territory, along this road, I realised that autism wasn't scary, it was just different, and that the wee boy was still the wee boy. I also learned that I had a new role and a new story - a warrior. I clearly recall seeing the image one night as I stood by his bed. He was asleep after we'd read the same page of the same book about 30 times, and I said the word cucumber another 20 times because it made him laugh - emotional cause and effect, any connection is

good. I stood over him and prayed for him. In my head I could see the image of a female African warrior, in tribal dress, with paint markings and jewellery on her upper arms, and a spear in her hand – a warrior – this was who I was to be, this was how or who I am now.

By February 2020 I was at the end. The road was too hard, the work was unending, the cost in money, time, sanity was too high. There was no way to go on. This had to stop, not even a battle-hardened warrior can survive this. I needed something to change. Then in March 2020 the world did stop...

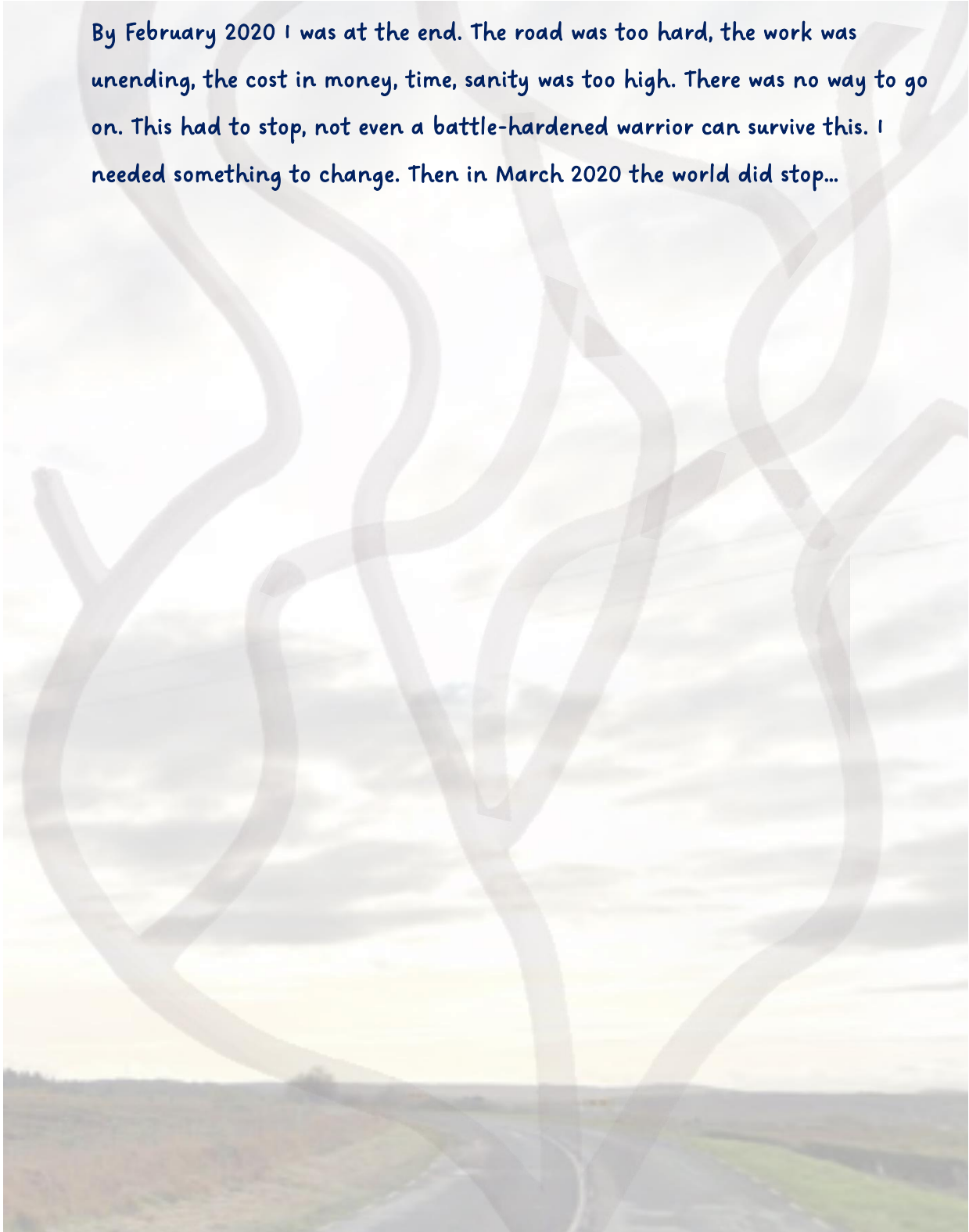


Image 4 Heart-Land Map | Stories

Setting the scene...

I considered naming this section, '*How to read this story*' but truthfully, I would never presume to tell you how I think you should experience this story. Bochner and Ellis (2016, p.212), say that when evaluating evocative autoethnography we should be able to feel the "flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life's contingencies." My wish for this story then is that my experience in the border country will give readers the lens to look around and see what "life feels like now and what it can mean" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016 p.213). So next I present a guide which I hope will be useful in exploring this story of my stories.

Timeline

I've always enjoyed those stories that begin near the end, give some information, then take us back in time, letting us see how things started, how we ended up here and then moving forwards again perhaps towards some type of resolution or understanding of the journey. In gathering and telling this story, it has very often felt as though I've been trying to contain an octopus. For a long time, the content and ideas existed in multiple documents and various formats and when it seemed that one part, one track was coming together, others would float off into untamed, unknowingness – still now I don't know what it will be at the end. I form parts and then form other separate parts but don't yet know how they fit together - a bit like building a jigsaw without a picture of the finished product to work towards. When I read stories or watch movies I like to know how it ends, I will always read the last page of a book before beginning, so it is both strange and amusing to me that over the past months as I've sought to write this story, I have no idea what will happen, in what order and how it will end.

The format of this thesis doesn't follow the typical order just as the stories here don't run in chronological order. Some content may sit out of time completely, meaning it can fit in wherever you think it fits, it isn't limited to one place in time in these stories. Storied content appears in a different font or is presented as a graphic, an image, or notes on a page. I have tried to begin and end with the stories I feel are most representative of where this journey began and where, while not ended, it is now.

Images and #Songs

Since starting this journey I've come to the clear realisation that I speak in stories and think in images, so to be authentic here, my experiential language must include the pictures that form in my mind. While initially I was concerned that this would seem unusual to others, I find connection with Romanyshyn's (2007) invitation to the researcher to take seriously, attend to, record and work through the fantasies and images that arise when pondering and reflecting rather than actively thinking about this work.

In recent times as I try to make some sense of my research topic, I experience the image of swimming or rather submerging and re-emerging, in a clear, oily, slippery (Pelias, 2019) body of water. There are many vines dipping into the water and yet there is nothing concrete anywhere around me. While I'm not threatened, I'm just there, I would prefer the scene was more illuminated ... I wonder if this is the unknowing. The unknown of what my thesis will become. The negative capability that at once seems daunting and freeing,

refers to the capacity to hold and contain feelings of distress and disturbance from not knowing and allowing knowing to emerge from that place. It requires the capacity to sit with not knowing and trust the process of coming to know (McCormack, 2014).

This slippery water image is an off shoot of the sea swimming episode in Donegal on a cold, cloudy, seaweed heavy day last summer but there is more to be made of that, and that is another story...

Several song titles feature as part of the story, and I have indicated these with a hashtag. I found myself using hashtags when referring to songs quite early in the process with no clear sense of why. Only recently it seems that my, at that stage unconscious reasoning, is that at different times in my stories various songs have been trending, have been the theme song to a particular story, event, image or had something to share with me at that time. In keeping with the layered approach to the autoethnography, the key lyrics will be included as will the Spotify code to access the playlist of the songs should you wish to experience the song as well as read some of the lyrics.

Characters

The characters in this story do not use names. In keeping with the theme of narrative identity, we know them by and from their stories. The story is the story. Some are recurring characters, appearing in several stories, others feature briefly, perhaps just contributing one line, others may be non-speaking, but may share a visual, an image. In keeping with the theme of inclusion, words are not always needed to communicate, and all methods of communication are valid and welcomed.

In exploring my journey to becoming and being the warrior, I've tried to answer the call of Bochner and Ellis (2016) who, when evaluating autoethnography, seek complex narratives representing the curve of time. Accounts that bring emotional vulnerability, credibility and take account of life's limitations, cultural scripts resistant to transformation, contradictory feelings, and layers of subjectivity. The appeal of autoethnography is it requires (Bochner & Ellis, 2016 p.213) "a tale of two selves, one that shows a believable journey from who I was to who I am, and how a life course can be reimaged or transformed by crisis".

Audience Information / Spoilers

I struggled to find a structure for this thesis because I feel called to write it as a story about my exploration of my stories. So how to include all the content required for a scholarly piece of work while avoiding spoilers and keeping the flow of the story? In this research, I make reference to cultural phenomena, TV, songs, to show that this can be used to emphasise or illustrate my message, because it speaks to me, helps me make meaning – but am also using them to illustrate that you, as reader, can use any means that speaks to you, that helps you to make meaning in this story or any story where you would find it useful.

Here I would like to make you aware of some plot spoilers though – it is important as I tell this story and share it with you that I am mindful of you and your experience in reading, experiencing these stories. Some of the topics covered in the stories are emotive. I will leave it to you to decide what is best and safest for you as you read through the stories. Please be aware that I discuss my experiences of grief, miscarriage, autism acceptance, disability advocacy and powerlessness. As I detail some of these experiences I use language that is not the preferred language for neurodivergent people. I am aware of this and intend no offence. I use the words,

spectrum and ASD to explain my journey to neurodiversity and autism acceptance and my journey with my autistic son.

Position... A long time ago, in a paradigm far far away

(30 years earlier)

This thesis will tell the story of my journey into the border country (McCormack, 2014; Hunt and West, 2012). There are stories in how I got here, beginning when the world stopped four years ago, with the idea of changing tracks and the call to the border country. Then looking backwards and moving forwards from a positivist, psychology is science background, to this new ground. This new territory accidentally discovered in this time in education, this liminal space (McCormack, 2014), to me a place in-between, a place of pure possibility (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), where I am no longer silent or invisible but present and authentic.

I take the ontological position that we form our identity through the narratives we tell ourselves throughout our lives. My previous research has been from a positivist position, with a strong empiricist focus, where the researcher is there but set apart, controlled for and unseen. Now, I find myself in a time in life and a place in society where it feels difficult to be seen and to be heard. This leads me to place significant value on my voice and agency and on the stories of others, local stories (Bochner, 2001) and on my stories.

I agree with Grant and Zeeman (2012), that we all live storied lives where our stories are embodied and performative, formed from dialogue and helping us shape and make meaning from our past and present experiences, emotions, and behaviour. I see my life in stories. I make sense of my life through my stories. I've realised that I love stories. I speak in stories, I tell stories to myself about myself, I'm interested in the stories of others, I get to know people through their stories, and I willingly share many of my stories with others. I live a storied life, and I live my stories.

In this thesis, I will explore my lived experience and my stories, leaving behind (mostly) my positivist roots and working from a constructivist, post-structuralist position, exploring “the relationships between human beings”, in this case me as participant researcher, “their worlds and their practices of making meanings through language”. (Speedy, 2005, p.63)

I use an autoethnographic methodology to explore narrative identity.

Autoethnography has been described as ‘a form of self-narrative that places the author’s lived experience within a social and cultural context’ (Reed-Danahay, 2009, p.30). I want to be seen, heard, present, and it is energising to me that there is a form of research, equally valid, worthwhile research that will allow, enable, empower me to do this, both in the writing of it and the writing in and with it (Bocker and Ellis, 2016). Far from my psychology roots, Speedy (2005, p.63) describes this writing as inquiry as

an attempt to capture the readers’ attention and engage them in conversation...assumes a reflexive, situated researcher... leaves much unsaid, uncertain, and incomplete. It is, at best, a balancing act between form and content... playful, often poetic, often experimental and often fictionalised...it tends towards distillation and description rather than explanation or analysis...it attempts to provide sufficient substance to contribute towards scholarship in the field as well as sufficient space to engage the reader’s imagination.

My first meeting with autoethnography was through Carolyn Ellis’s *Heartful Autoethnography* (1999) where she talks about creating an ethnography to “include researchers’ vulnerable selves, emotions, bodies, and spirits” producing evocative stories that can create the effect of reality and examine how human experience is endowed with meaning. I immediately identified with this method, it felt like something on a very simple level I had been doing in my head from many years – telling and retelling my own stories, reliving, re-experiencing, sense-making in a personal and a wider context, I felt at home here.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) in *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* outline the autoethnography paradigm and how autoethnography can represent lived experiences. They explain autoethnography as an orientation to research where writing (graph) is central. It involves the outward looking towards culture (ethno) lens and the inward reflection towards self, as vulnerable observer. Use of the first-person is usual but not essential and they emphasise that a variety of forms and diverse styles can be used to express some form of concrete action.

More than once recently I’ve found myself feeling that I’ll miss this process when it is concluded – when the thesis is submitted. Although the closer the submission date

gets the less sure I am of this! I do genuinely believe that I will miss this process...what process I hear you ask? The thinking about this, the time in the border country here. Carolyn Ellis (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016, p.10) says she thrived from living an autoethnographic life, "one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively". A way of living that requires us to consider "how and why we think, act and feel as we do...observe ourselves observing...interrogate what we think and believe...challenge our own assumptions...rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be." In doing this we "...seek a story that is hopeful" where we write ourselves as survivors in the stories we live. This.

Where am I?

In doing this research, I have often thought of where I started, where I am, where I'm going and when considering where I position myself in my writing, I have found myself pondering literally where I position myself. At the beginning, I started in my home office, where I do my work-work. Sitting but more often standing at my desk. I worked on my first assignment, the research methods assignment here. I still remember starting that assignment - I didn't know where to start or how to start, so I just started writing, beginning at the beginning of my story - my own Once upon a time and I followed that story. It was what became the first of many nights working past the wee hours and crossing over into the next morning - what I've come to call the border country between night and day, today and tomorrow, where I find time and space to write, or to think about writing or to write about thinking about writing.

This was where I first met autoethnography. Working on that first research methods assignment, while simultaneously exhausting and overwhelming was by far one of my favourite memories of this course. It was inspiring and motivating and empowering, as I found myself typing and dancing, my (American) country music playlist keeping me moving. It was an exciting time, the discovery, the nervous energy, the newness, the happy vulnerability, a bit like the early days of a relationship, of falling in love (but with what, with who - study, learning, rediscovery, the old me, the new me?).

It was at some stage here that I first heard the Randy Houser song #NoteToSelf ...how many gems of wisdom I've found in that song since? Quite literally the sound track to my life in Semester One of this past year.

Sometime later as the idea of the thesis and the pattern of the course became more established, I changed location. A torn rotator cuff meant that a change in seating was needed to support my shoulder. I found that I tended to work on what we call "the one couch" - my son's neurodivergent brain is often very insightful and obvious in how it labels things. A three-seater couch is a three-couch, and a single seater is a "one-couch". Makes perfect sense really. So, the one-couch became my seat, my workspace, the bookshelf to my left has all my articles - sometimes they are in order, arranged by topic and sub-topic, most relevant at the top and other times, I've literally buried myself in an avalanche of slumped piles, articles each struggling to be seen or to see the light of day in the corner of the sitting room or in my mind.

To my right and constantly beside me on the three-couch is my son, the wee boy. Sometimes he is oblivious to my attempts to find meaning or make sense of my topic and my stories, and he talks at me about his YouTube video of choice. Even when we've watched the video multiple times, there is always time, in his mind, for us to watch it again. Sometimes this is frustrating, I have work to do, but also this is gold dust, shared attention, sharing of his special interests. There were days and years where I wondered if we'd ever get here, if he needed me near him at all, if he even knew I was there. If, even after I spent hours beside him trying to connect, to "read his brain", it made any difference to him at all? So now we share our "work" spaces together and I model how to keep going with my homework, to keep working even when it is hard, when I'm tired, when I don't want to, when I need to take a break and come back to try again - everything can be a teaching or a learning opportunity for an additional needs kid's Mum and her child.

"So do you work from there because you want to or...?"

"I don't know, is it because I feel guilty if I am not with him, actively listening should he want to share attention, engage, not feel alone, or because I don't value my own time, headspace enough and can't find a way to make time away from him when I'm working on my thesis?"

"Is that modelling behaviour too...?"

"Ooh, I don't love that question, I feel exposed in the light of realisation... what am I showing my other children... don't prioritise your own needs, advocate for others but not for yourself, be there for others but not for yourself...?"

"I don't do my job work here though, that always stays in the office - I don't bring it into the family domain, so is this a sign that I want to bring thesis into our family life?"

"What is the difference here...between work and the thesis?"

"Also interesting...it seems I feel that the thesis brings authentic value, to me, and I am happy to invite that into our family, to have it come in and sit down in our living room, in the middle of our family life. It is the realisation (the real-life embodiment) of me being me, and I want to bring this part of my story into the "mainstream" family life.

Autoethnography ... Meant to be?

Every now and then in my life I've found myself exactly in the right place at the right time, making a connection that feels completely authentic – some might say “meant to be”. This is how I feel about my meeting with autoethnography. I'm late to this party but as soon as I arrived I felt welcomed in, like catching up with old friends or new friends that feel like old friends.

Bochner and Ellis (2016, p.66) position autoethnography in a space “between science and art; between epistemology and ontology; between facts and meaning, between experience and language; ...between a commitment to document the reality of what actually happened and a desire to make readers feel that truth coursing through their blood and guts.” In their evocative autoethnographic approach they “...combine the systematic, ‘scientific’ methodologies of ethnography with the evocative, creative, and artistic elements and forms of storytelling.” (Bochner and Ellis 2016, p67).

Sometimes when the wee boy gets overwhelmed and doesn't understand what is happening I explain by saying that he is feeling “too many feelings together” that this is ok, it is good to feel our feelings but sometimes when feelings get too much to hold inside they can spill out our eyes. My stories can be experiential, merging with and building on, images, dreams, sensations and sometimes too many feelings, to gather a full picture of this time in the border country.

Autoethnographies focus on telling the story, experiencing the story, and this is where I find myself now. Exploring the heart-shaped landscape of my own stories, wondering where I will find myself, not sure how it will turn out but happy to wander and wonder.

Creswell (2013 p.73) highlights that autoethnographic narratives, "contain the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual's story". It can allow others to see someone like me, to see, to feel what is happening in my society, in my life and it will be known and maybe it can authenticate, acknowledge and validate the experience of others. I was energised on this journey to find Conlon (2019) expressing similar sentiment about an entirely different topic, albeit in the same society.

A key part in exploring my key stories was to start by exploring and experiencing the stories of others, including family stories (Rath, 2018), injury and recovery, (Culkin, 2019), adoption (Conlon, 2019), sense-making (Trish, & Seko, 2017; Vicker, 2007) and many on parenting autistic or disabled children, usually (Zibricky, 2014; Britton, 2013; Grassie, 2009) but not always (Clasquin-Johnson & Clasquin-Johnson, 2018) from the mother's perspective.

Are there stories in the silence?

I began journaling in October at that stage more to note events as they happened, after they happened without too much exploration of my experience of the events. This journaling was inconsistent in when it happened but did record the events that I felt were most significant to my experience of this course, From mid-December onwards the journaling stopped. I named it the silent treatment— where I was no longer willing to share my thoughts and feelings with the journal or no longer willing to hear myself share my thoughts, feelings and lived experience. Living it was enough without writing it and reliving the living of it - the feeling excluded and silenced and was it that I silenced myself?

It is very puzzling me that so much focus over the course of this research is the idea that I want my voice to be heard and that I want to feel free to express my thoughts, my opinions, to feel free to use my voice – and yet one of my greatest challenges through this whole process is letting myself speak up - even to myself in my journaling. I'm happy to think it but very reluctant to write it, to give myself permission to write it. (Personal Research Journal, May 2024)

What does this mean for autoethnography as method, is this a weakness in my process or a natural part of a process that has a “vulnerable observer”? (Bochner and Ellis, 2016 p.66). In exploring other autoethnographic research I've found reference to this inability to write (Speedy, 2013, McCormack 2014) and the practice of writing about not writing. I didn't do that but found comfort in Wall (2006 p.146) who spoke about gathering thoughts “swirling in her head for a month” before being able to commit them to paper, just as was my experience.

As I learned more about autoethnography I wondered, have I missed opportunities in my research given that until recently I haven't been consistently journaling, or recording my experiences anywhere except in my memory? This came up in the *Heartful Autoethnography* conversation, with Ellis telling her student that memory is not linear, and that thoughts and feelings circle around, merge, drop away then reappear and that our current position will always influence our interpretation of past events. Memories are not without value though once the exploration process is nuanced and meaningful (Ellis, 1999). She spoke of "a process of emotional recall, imagining being back in a scene emotionally and physically. If you can revisit the scene emotionally, then you remember other details" (Ellis, 1999 p.675).

I find myself doing this often when trying to process or simply relive a particular experience and in the context of my research I found Ellis's content reassuring, where writing close to the event can be useful in accessing the feelings, it can be challenging detaching from them enough to bring perspective and that producing an effective autoethnography requires moving in and out of the experience, both when memory is fresh and when distance will allow a cultural perspective (Ellis, 1999).

When I grow up I want to be a writer...

One of the most comforting and simultaneously discombobulating quotes I've found, and I've come back to it many times since last October is in McCormack (2014), quoting Bollas (1987, p. 10), "I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is that I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it".

Speedy (2013) with *Where the wild dreams are: Fragments from the spaces between research, writing, autoethnography, and psychotherapy* speaks to me recently where I felt I could find "no voice to speak of.... I sat disconnected, haunted by my own silence, and surrounded by disjointed fragments of writing that refused to write themselves into anything coherent".

Speedy (2013), shares her experience with writing a piece that “will not write me” and “may be unwritable for the moment”, her endeavours to make the words come and her trust in “writing as inquiry” and trusting the process.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) talk about readers of autoethnography first thinking *with* the story, taking on the story, living in it, relating it to our own stories, then thinking *about* the story so that even without a literature review or a discussion, themes can be found, and we can begin to theorise.

Let there be Chaos (Hadjiosif,2023) also details the “fun” that autoethnography brings, and fun in this context leads me to recall a Happy Girl narrative. She who even when faced with chaos and uncertainty would embrace it and say, “It’ll be an adventure.” Writing around and writing with the octopus in the room is like that, it is taking shape.

Autoethnography can be both slippery and confusing with a feeling of it writing itself. Quite early in my research I found Allbon’s (2012) “Down the rabbit hole, Curiouser and curiouser” article and like the call of the border country when I first read McCormack (2014), the image, the experience evoked by these words resonated with me. Many times, on my research journey I refer to the octopus in the room. A friendly, non-threatening octopus, just slippery and on occasion prone to juggling squirrels when ideas are particularly difficult to corral. Normally when I read a book, I always read the last page, I like to know what to expect, then I can be prepared – it is ironic then that in this story about my stories I don’t yet know what to expect and how it will end.

When exploring methodology, I spoke about exploring emerging themes in my writing but as I looked at autoethnography I became conflicted in how this would and could work. Some writing (Galman, 2011) and Ellis (2009) in her review of Chang’s book – detail an autoethnography by formula or by numbers which didn’t connect with me. My husband is amazed that given my systems-oriented brain and love of order in many things, I can’t follow directions or read instructions – I know why though, my preference is to get a feel for things, to get a sense of how things work, to let the knowledge, the path emerge. This is also why I love the evocative work of Ellis, the emotion, the heart and soul, blood and guts, the roll up your sleeves and get into the experience approach.

I reflect on the emergent knowledge and awareness that this process shows me. Not unlike what I do to build connections with the wee boy in his world, and gradually stretch the experience outwards so that others can join in.

This is why it calls me, is there a way that this autoethnography research can help the warrior?

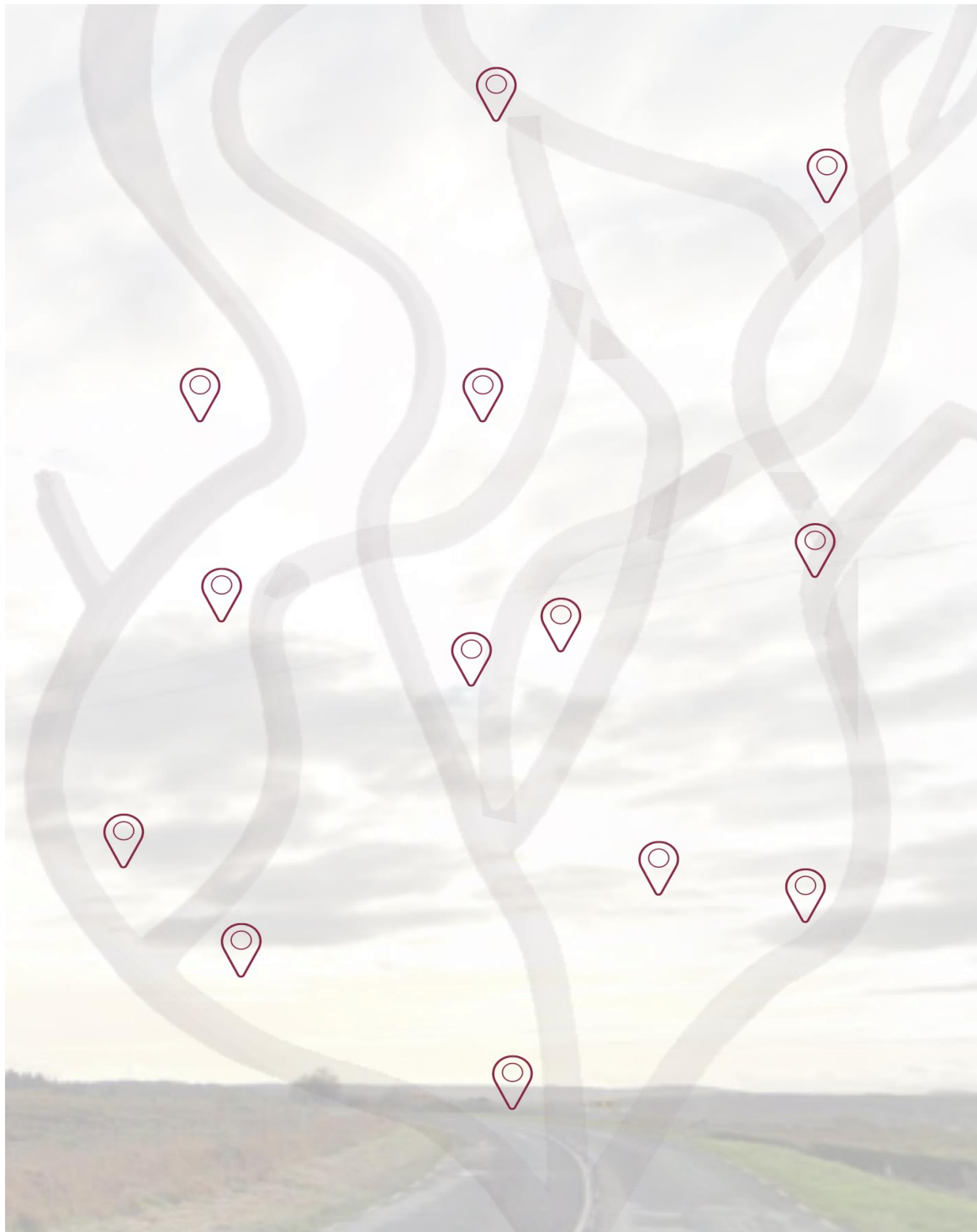


Image 5 – Stories Map (Heart-Land). Image by Natasha. Canva May 2024

The teacher (1995 – 1999)

At the start of my teaching career, I felt so unprepared going into totally uncharted territory. In my first year, working as a teacher, I didn't have a teaching qualification or any teaching experience and felt that I was lacking without it, I began my career in education feeling not good enough and not worthy of being there. Even though I gained my teaching qualification, the Higher Diploma in Education (HDip as we called it then), the following year that feeling didn't go away. I began to realise that for me, teaching was primarily a learn-by-doing job. The course covered a lot of theories but there was little guidance on how to apply these, or at least how to apply these in a real-life classroom with real teenagers. I don't recall any mention of Special Educational Needs during my training. There was no mention of neurodiversity, the term didn't exist then, but neither did the awareness generally of what most additional needs would look like in a classroom. I had one "remedial class" where there were obvious challenges in literacy as well as in attention and executive function. I didn't know any of these words then and started working with them at a level significantly different from what was helpful for them. I gave them too much content and thought that copying notes down from the board was a good use of class time – this was probably the most challenging task I could have given them. I didn't realise that a messy notes copy wasn't a reflection of lack of interest or attention, in fact, it could have been evidence of a huge effort on a difficult task.

Looking back now, I am also ashamed of how I acted in some classes and of how I treated some kids when I first started teaching. I assumed that everyone had the level of ability that I had at their age. I valued and appreciated the good student and couldn't quite grasp why a student wouldn't be able to do the work. Looking back with what I know now, there were students in my class who had additional educational needs and who were neurodivergent, albeit without a formal diagnosis. How I would praise and encourage and cherish all their efforts if I was back there now – all those efforts that went practically unnoticed to me

at the time. I would also say I'm sorry, I should have done better. I would say "please forgive me, I should have done better."

1997, was the third of my four years teaching in a post-primary school. I remember feeling more confident now, trying to be more authentic in myself. I'd left behind the "don't smile until Christmas" advice I'd heard in my first years and was now more "me" in the room, sometimes anyway. I still felt anxious walking in, I didn't feel on top of all the content I was teaching, I felt I wasn't good enough, but I did want to build positive relationships with the kids. I wanted to be the teacher that kids would chat to if they needed to, the teacher who would encourage and motivate, to help students believe in themselves and see themselves succeed in how they tried and what they did, not the grades they achieved. I felt proud for them in their big and seemingly small achievements.

I remember feeling stuck. Being a teacher was ...what's the right word? ... sometimes good, sometimes bad, rarely just right though. Sometimes, it was so rewarding and motivating. There were times when I could see a child learning, see them gaining a new understanding from the unusual way I'd find to explain something, so it made sense, blooming from encouragement and from their pride in their own efforts and achievements. Other times it was so hard, challenging, confidence sapping. Is that the lot of an early career teacher, was I lacking in confidence or just not good enough? At this time, the news was filled with stories of Diana, Princess of Wales. She had died in August 1997 and for months there were tv programmes and magazine supplements sharing stories about her. Stories about her life, how she helped others, how she saw herself, what she did to re-imagine and take control of her own story as she moved out of the shadow of the institution of the Royal Family. I remember reading how she chose to focus on helping others, to make a positive contribution to the lives of others and perhaps to bring meaning to her life. When she met people she asked about their stories, she listened as they shared their stories. I found this inspiring. I knew I couldn't stay where and how I was, but I could do this. I could ask people their stories, I could listen and encourage. I also needed a new place.... seems that for me, that was Canada...

The Happy Girl

Why Canada? Can I remember why? I knew that it looked beautiful. Bryan Adams and his oh so handsome lead guitarist were touring Canada at the time. I was going to say, that I am not sure the place was important, but I think it was - I needed a place where I felt I could breathe, deeply, freely outside of this claustrophobic experience of small town, hometown, where I felt both exposed and excluded. There was something appealing about the wide-open spaces or the feeling of a wide-open freeing space, another visit to what to me was border country...

Here I felt stuck, suffocating, couldn't stay where I was, there was a chance that I could just disappear, or never evolve, like a caterpillar that knew something was coming, something needed to happen, but it was unknown and scary, so maybe just keep your head down and don't do anything. But no... not here.

Me: "Sometimes I just wish I could go travelling, like to Canada or somewhere..."

Mum: "Well then do it" and that was it... of all the things she'd ever said to me.... In that moment, that made the difference. It was freeing, what was stopping me? Nothing really... I had time, we had a February mid-term break coming up in a few weeks, I had money and a passport. So, I booked flights and a nice hotel, one my mum had heard of, more expensive than was financially wise but for a young woman travelling alone for the first time, it was also wise.

My heartbeat quickens when I remember the five-hour bus journey to Dublin to get the flight. Smiling inside and out, I had my usual, travel sickness combatting, front seat on the bus and I remember that the sky was blue. This was the first time I stepped out on the road, to a new place, a place in between, who I was being and who I really was or who I wanted to be... or more accurately to the story I felt was mine.

The brave, quirky, slightly crazy but in a gentle and kind way, girl who just decided to go to Canada in the aftermath of an ice-storm., with no real plans except a concert in Winnipeg. It was Valentines Day when I flew out...and for many years afterwards, up until my now husband was my then fiancé, 14th February was the day I willingly celebrated, not alone but with myself, showing me how brave I was. I'd always do something with myself that day, usually cinema alone (or more accurately, with myself) to remind me of that first step out into the #WideOpenSpaces. That time in Toronto was transformative to me - I was free to be brave and friendly, free to speak, to chat without being seen or known as an extension of or reflection on my parents' jobs. I was free to be me, I was free to be Tasha.

In Canada, that is where this journey started, and I wanted to be sure I could stay the me I was there - brave, feel the fear and do it anyway (Jeffers, 2007), find the positive in everything. When I came back I found my first theme song, Martina McBride's #HappyGirl. I took that theme, and I ran with it - be happy, not always of course, but in every situation, look for the positive, for the happy, do the things that feed my soul and make me happy....and find a way to get back to Canada...that road runs through the wide-open spaces of the border country.

When we talk, in career guidance practice about the factors that can influence our career choice, we often think matching, interest, values, familiarity with certain careers, or motivations like helping people, money, success, or in my case, a job title that would enable me to emigrate to Canada. Teachers weren't on the list of accepted occupations, careers advisers/guidance counsellors were - ok, maybe this is where my story goes.

On the fence with the narratives

Clandinin (2019 p.228) explains Story, as the “portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful”, saying that we shape our lives around the stories of who we are, who others are and what meaning we take from the stories of our past.

As I started to look more into our storied lives, narrative identity, and narrative inquiry I became quite overwhelmed, going around in circles and in exploring this confusion I made an interesting discovery. I found myself back in relatively familiar territory, back where I started out ...

Some of the reading around narrative identity, has brought me back to the positivist psychology side of the fence, or at least psychology territory, maybe there isn't a fence between paradigms anymore. While it is interesting, the language style is more detached and not the language I feel connected to or drawn to speak in this research.

Speaking with my teenage son at this time, he asked how it was going, knowing from looking at me that I was stuck. I said if I could just get through this part, get a handle on how to make proper use of all the articles piled around me here, that I felt I could move forward from there. I said that it feels like I'm in a field, a bog stuck up to my knees in that dense, boggy mud and I can't move through it. Or like I'm in a wide-open space, a wilderness and I need to be on the other side of a fence, this side is not where I am truly myself, I feel vulnerable (and not in a good way) and inadequate here, the other side of the fence is where I feel I fit in, that I have a contribution to make.

“Where are you with the fence?”, my son asked me, “on the fence or looking at it?”.

“It is barbed wire fence”, I replied “and I'm caught, can't get through and can't go back, just stuck here, caught up in the fence”.

McAdams (2018) talks about trying to generate an image of what identity might look like – a three ringed circus with different activities in each ring, or as time went on, as a *story*. He described identity as a life story which had “...settings, scenes, characters, plots and themes, a big story, a personal myth (McAdams 1990) which situates a person in the world, integrates a life in time and provides meaning and purpose”. The idea of narrative identity has evolved considerably in the passing

decades with some seeing narrative identity now as a big story integrating different chapters, characters and scenes and others exploring smaller stories in certain realms or contexts. Some researchers (Alea, 2018) look at specific scenes within a life story, focusing on high and low points, turning points with a view to examining emotional themes such as redemption and contamination. Others look at more specific stories e.g. self-harm or intercultural encounters and McAdams points out that “these specific stories within specific domains suggest that people tell different kinds of stories about different things” and that this can make a big difference.

Dunlop (2018) suggests a hierarchical model where role-based stories contribute to a broader narrative about who we are, so I would hold my stories about me as a mother and me as a careers adviser beside each other and these would feed up to my broader narrative about who I am and how I came to be me. Smaller stories then position themselves in a hierarchy feeding up to their relevant “bigger” story. I agree with McAdams’ thoughts that this model is perhaps neater than is realistic for mapping narrative identity. I agree with McAdams and Dunlop that smaller role based stories do have a role to play in the bigger narrative scheme – McAdams suggests a more literacy/ short-story collection as an option using Strout’s (2008) Pulitzer Prize winning collection *Olive Kitteridge* as an example – a collection of stories, connected but not adding up to a novel, with the story of the main character to some degree running through all the other stories, with recurring characters and themes and a distinct and emotive tone.

It was when I read this that I managed to free myself from the fence I felt had been stuck in. I loved this idea, most especially because I take it as confirmation that the heart-land “traffic maps” analogy that I had been using to describe my work in this thesis may seem possible. In my exploration of my narrative identity, my storied life, my thinking is that we, as with *Olive*, have a broad landscape with many events and characters, not all in focus at once but all adding something somewhere to be brought into focus at their time or at an unexpected time. Some are key events, some are small events, that play a key role, high points, low points and turning points.

The starting point is the same and the end point, for now at the end of this course, will be the same but the route from one point to another can be “selected” as the dominant story, much like heart-land “traffic” maps shows several routes, some with tolls, some with delays, some with motorways and we can select which route to highlight as the route we are travelling. The setting, the border country hasn’t changed but the dominant story can change.

What do stories do? What is the function of stories? They entertain us, engage human emotions, simulate social experiences, they teach us how to be human (McAdams 2015) and narrative identity is formed by integrating social roles, values and attitudes, showing how the self from yesterday became the self of today and will become the same or different self of the future. (McAdams 2018).

People use stories for social, directive or self, functions. *Social* in that people enjoy sharing stories with others and I find myself thinking of the importance of not just the telling but also of the listening (O’Neill, 2015) to stories. *Directive* in learning from or mining stories for guidance which could be helpful in the current situation. Or *Self* providing continuity and integration or a means of boosting morale - an interesting finding from Liao et al. (2018) showed that positive meaning making in self-defining memories predicted enhanced self-esteem one year later. I find myself wondering, is this another way of suggesting that self-esteem is influenced when the dominant or preferred story is positively aligned with the individual, or the opposite, where there is dissonance between self-defining memories or stories and the individuals preferred or dominant story?

McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) suggest that narrative identity is built up gradually overtime as people tell stories of experience to and with others so that eventually “selves, create stories, which in turn create selves...through repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the story teller gradually developed a broader and more integrative narrative identity.” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p235).

Anderson & Glass-Coffin (2016) talk about strong reflexivity and reflecting on “one’s self and experience at different points in time”, for example, drawing on different vignettes from his diaries at different points in this life to explore his academic career or familial relationships (Humphreys, 2005; Guyas 2005).

Dunlop (2018) talked about the changes over time in the key “landmarks”, that is, events and stories identified by people when retelling their stories at different points in time. Concluding he emphasised the importance of exploring the ways in which narrative identity is dynamic over time and across contexts. This resonates with me, it aligns with my image of the heart-land “traffic-maps”, the dominant narrative, changeable over time, like selecting one route over another before setting out or changing track midway through a journey.

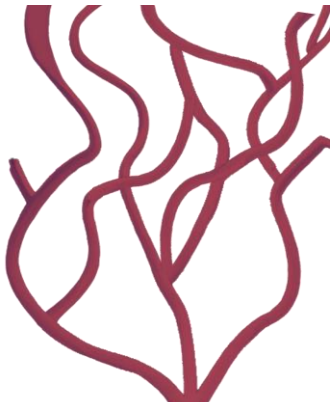
Mapping Heart-land and Story

I have created a graphic representation of my life stories, with some of my stories represented by the paths. At various times in my life, different stories have been the dominant story, the story from which I took my identity at that time, these are represented in different colours.

It was both surprising and interesting to me that when I created this graphic, the completed shape, to me, resembled an anatomical heart, with the various veins and arteries running through it. I am happy with this as a representation of my life Stories – my heart, my life is in my stories, is in my Stories

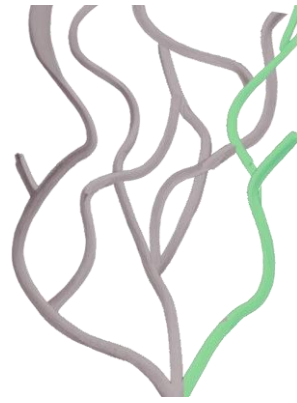
As the dominant story changes, the track switches, a different colour story now becomes the dominant story. The landscape of the heart-land is scattered with events, major, minor, big or small, and any one or a combination can cause the dominant story to switch.

Re-Storying – Mapping the Heart-land

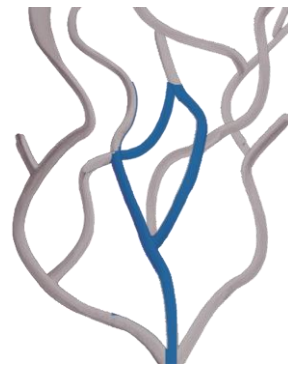


These are a visual representation of how I think of my storied life.

Each pathway is a story, events, experiences, education or anything that has influence on me has the potential to switch the track of my story to another track.



Each different colour represents a different dominant story. Sometimes the dominant story will work for me. Other times the dominant story doesn't align with an identity that feels authentic or helpful for me.



In the image below you can see two colours. Where the dominant story had been the yellow track, then switched to the blue tracks over time.

When I realised that this was not a helpful dominant story or identity for me, I could, over the course of this research, **Re-Story** my narrative identity and switch back to the yellow track. The previous blue is still visible beneath – the experience of the previous Story (track) has not disappeared.

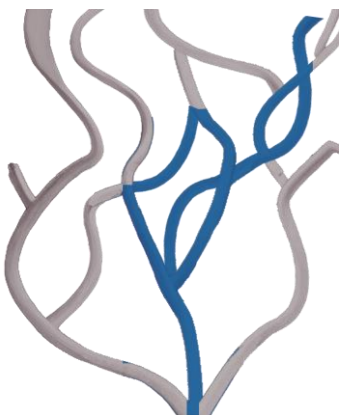


Image 6 – Multiple versions of Heart-Land Stories Map

McAdams (2019) makes the interesting point that not everyone may identify with narrative – and this made me think – when we say narrative, what do we mean, not just spoken or written story? Perhaps your narrative is in songs from periods of your life, a soundtrack to the movie of your story as it plays in your mind, or a song that evokes a story (like *Brothers in arms* and *my babies*) or an image from a time/place. While the primary focus of narrative is language, is that inclusive, we don't all think in words, some people may see their stories in pictures (Grandin, 2023, 2006), This research has shown me how important visuals, images are to and in my own stories.

Attentive listening helps promote the development of narrative identity – when sharing stories people are more likely to share the meaning making aspects of the story if they feel that the listener is actively engaged in listening to their story.

Thinking as a guidance counsellor with a new found interest in narrative identity and our storied lives, this is important and a challenge in a short appointment, high-volume Careers Service. McAdams (2013) quoted in McAdams & McLean (2013) describes how cultural narratives about history, politics, religion can sustain or transform a culture, forming master narratives about specific cultures. Is this part of the Donegal culture, how we see ourselves, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our differentness?

I find myself wondering how well master narratives related to real lived experience. To me the appeal of autoethnography is that it “..enables the detailed interrogation and critique of potentially or actually oppressive and repressive cultural institutions, norms, values, practices and logics”, where in a broader, less personal, less reflexive form there is the possibility that the same information could be “...overlooked ...represented in benign, magnanimous, or positive terms in rationally nuanced master narratives”. (Grant & Zeeman, 2012).

Our autoethnography “local stories” can be told in the context of our embodied, lived experience, also enabling reflective story telling in political, moral and ethical terms (Grant & Zeeman, 2012). In my experience, experts in name, (policy makers, managers, clinicians) trading in master narratives, have more power, voice, value, and currency than experts by experience (Reimer 1977 quoted in Grant and Zeeman, 2012), that is parents, or the individual do, because there is not always the means to have our individual stories heard.

The house is on fire

Just this week (19 June, 2024), thirteen-year-old Cara Darmody, she has announced that she will hold weekly protests alternating between outside the Department of the Taoiseach and Leinster House. She has repeatedly told her story, the story of her family and their fight to provide care and get supports for her two autistic brothers. She previously told her story to the Oireachtas Committee on Autism (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023, Murphy, 2022). Her words have stuck with me, because they are true, speaking about how a change of attitude, a change in how we look at things, in how we tell the story is needed, "They need to realise, they need to treat this like a house is on fire. It needs to be treated like an emergency, like the house is on fire and they're not doing that. They change the way they think of things."

I have many times met a narrative, which depending on where it is said, can feel either well-meaning but misinformed, or malevolent. The *'you don't want to label him, is there really a need'* narrative versus the *'a label brings a legal entitlement to support for his disability and the onus to provide the support'* narrative. Or the use of "special needs" typically in my experience, referring to neurological or intellectual differences rather than physical disabilities, why - to highlight the wonderful qualities and 'specialness' of 'these children'? But what does special mean, can that be quantified, can 'strive' be quantified? What is a 'special need', must it be met, or is it acceptable to merely 'strive', to accommodate a 'special' need if funding allows. Whereas the new, gradually coming into use - additional needs - is more quantifiable, something obviously in addition to the norm, and if it can be quantified it should be supported, provided for, funded. The outcome of the recent "care referendum" showed that those with local stories did not subscribe to the master narrative that a commitment to "strive to support" will be enough or anything, in terms of real supports for those of us on the day-to-day frontline of caring.

The lack of provision of SNAs – the buck moved to the principal's desk in terms of who gets what, another burden for the school, devolved or is it absolved, by the Department of Education (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, p 14). Special Needs Assistants (SNA), a wonderful, financially undervalued and hugely significant role, whose function is to support children with ~~special~~ additional needs in accessing the curriculum. A good idea in theory, or in master narrative, but in practice because of lack of resources, the highest priority, in some schools, the only priority, despite the best intentions and efforts of all in the school, are “care needs” – medical care, personal care, safety, risk of elopement (flight risk) and finally possibly sensory regulation. The importance of medical, care and safety needs are not in question but equally valid in accessing the curriculum and having an educational experience that is positive and not trauma inducing, is support for children with neurological difference, that means provision of nuanced sensory regulation support inside and outside the classroom. Support in executive function, organising books, translating complex or just long sentences into short instructions, into required actions, in the order in which they should be done, while remembering all the steps that come afterwards, while further instructions are being given and other students are making noise in the room and the light is imperceptibly flickering and now everyone else is ready to start the task – wait what are we doing again?

The master narrative here, in these instances looks good, at least acceptable, it is the lived personal experience though that gives the “blood and guts” (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p.66) experience of what this is really like on the battlefield.

This is what I mean when I say that I feel, and have been, unseen and unheard and where I see autoethnography as a means of being seen and heard.

Invitation to #ComeAsYouAre

When planning and thinking about how I would write the thesis. I knew that my data would be Stories, the stories from my life. However, we have too many to share in this context so which stories would be shared here? Earlier in the writing process I noted *“What makes a story important I hope will reveal itself over the course of this process and I write them, about them and in them. I find myself wondering too about the untold stories in this border country waiting to be told.”* (Personal Research Journal, February 2024)

Initially I was inspired by the wonderful Evocative Autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) where their lessons in autoethnography is presented as a workshop with fictional students, discussions, dialogue, even handouts and reading assignments for discussion at the workshop. I loved the creative aspect of this, or O'Neill's (2015) conversations on walking tours of Belfast, Glasgow and other areas. I heard myself say in conversation with my supervisor one day that I'd if I ever became someone who has the capacity to host dinner parties, Carolyn Ellis would be one of my dream guests, to hear her speak about autoethnography with such knowledge and passion. So, while not stretching to a dinner party, I thought that perhaps I could write a Get-together, in a place of significance to me, maybe a fundraiser for sensory resources for the wee boy's school, and the content for the stories would be generated here, with me as researcher participant. It seems my level optimism in my creative abilities far exceeds my actual abilities and that didn't happen.

I just couldn't get them, these characters who would share their stories, to come together, like the many chaotic, uncontrollable and uncontrolled goings on, that made up this thesis, they didn't want to come together; in fact, they didn't want to talk to each other at all. It felt like those times when I'd try (back in my single days) to get all the girls together. I was often the organiser, suggesting the date, venue, booking, confirming. I was happy to do this, I belonged, in this group, I felt loved and accepted, it was a wonderful time. It all faded away in the years after I got married, life happened, I was busy with husband and babies and miscarriages and life, and the get-togethers stopped happening. It would be disingenuous to say they stopped solely because I stopped organising them, I withdrew too. For me it is difficult to exist in two spaces at once, so I happily became, wife and mother, and the other life dissipated somewhere along that road, and I only noticed when it was gone.

As I tried to conjure up how I would frame this in the thesis, how to bring together all the characters who had a story to tell, it proved impossible to get them all to agree on a what, how or when. It is a bit like having lots of close friends, all friends with me, but while in-passing they've all heard about each other, may have heard some of each other's stories, they aren't friends and are not a group that would gel well together. Maybe they are all at different stages in their lives, have had different journeys, don't have enough in common with each other or have evolved, outgrown, or closed the door on each other.

They did want to share their stories though. All wanted to speak and have their stories, their sharing heard, just independently of each other. I found that realisation interesting – each has a message they wanted to share and while there is overlap in some, common themes in some, common metaphors appearing throughout, each wants to be included in their own way, to speak, to contribute, to have her voice and her story heard in the way that best works for her. In my journey as a parent advocate I have many times highlighted the need for equity as well as equality – that each be included in the way that best meets their needs, that represents them where they are and as they are – that being the case, how can I not do the same here?

When I worked as a teacher – interesting that I use those words rather than, when I was a teacher – one of my more experienced colleagues ran a fundraising initiative. She had her English class write letters (yes with paper and envelopes and stamps) to celebrities, local, national and international, asking them to contribute to the book – it could be a funny story like their most embarrassing moment, or a treasured memory, or a learning experience – anything that they would like to share about themselves and their lived experience that would be of interest to or beneficial to others. There were amazing submissions – the “most embarrassing moment” shared by the late Maeve Binchy is as I recall it now, still laugh out loud funny!



Come As You Are

Share with me what you'd have me know,
from yesterday or long ago,
burdens, joy, excitement, pain,
something I need to see again.

From little girl, to standing tall
at the edge of the world, send them all.

Scripture quote, movie scene,
Once upon a time, or in a dream?

A hint to joy, a helping hand.
What treasures in this border land?

Image 7 Poem by Natasha (June 2024)

So, I went with what it was, a representation of stories, gathered from various places scattered around this map in the border country. I thought of it as a #NoteToSelf endeavour and so I sent an invitation to all the other Me's, wherever they were in their Stories. The call for submissions #ComeAsYouAre. Throwing the net wide to my storytellers, the text of the invitation, a poem, seemed to write itself, requesting anything, any sharing that they felt was of value. #ComeAsYouAre and I would hear what they had to share, big or small, recent, or not, a phrase, a song title or lyric, anything that spoke to them of their Story. At the start of this process, I didn't know what would be shared, they have arrived in a slow but steady stream, sometimes a flood. Some I expected to see having encountered them during this year in the border country, journalling is the ultimate #NoteToSelf, others while discussed in the journalling didn't seem to need to be heard beyond that.

A home for the warrior

I came to this research with a very clear presence of a warrior persona, I say persona, what Jung defined as a kind of mask or face we show to society (Sauder MacGuire, 2017), because to me this was who I was being or what I was doing but it wasn't who I am. I didn't identify with the battle-hardened warrior but did not see a way to discard her or to free myself from her or know whether that was even possible. After all she had a job to do, a role to play. In our group supervision, a question "what would it be like to use the warrior for good, for me, here now, in this time and in this space?" brought about the first change in my thinking. I became aware of a fluidity in these personas as I called them then. While the warrior was battle-hardened and used a dark currency of negative messages, she was also brave – I could use that. And I did use that, when faced with choices of staying silent or speaking for myself, I put her to work, and things began to change. I sought out places where I could have agency and access to power and small changes made big differences in my thoughts and in my daily life.

The warrior identity, the warrior Story as I know it now, came from my journey as a parent, but this course is in guidance and counselling so where was guidance in all of this – being honest, at the start I didn't care, I couldn't care.

Galman (2011) talks about competing and converging positions and identities, reminding me of earlier stages in this journey where the warrior, battle weary, bloodied and broken, arrived on the course screaming to be heard, seen and in so doing, helped. She was in some ways a metaphorical orphan, running around peering in the windows of therapeutic and educational service providers, pleading for a crumb of involvement, inclusion and agency. I sought to find a way to give her the voice she wanted, to name her as someone in my life.

Seeking a home initially somewhere in the guidance counselling house, I looked at Super's life roles and life stages. I was looking for a guidance framework where I could see her, where she was, what she needed and what she needed was for something to change. Realistically the roles I play, mother, career professional, advocate, spiritual being – child of God, all these were unlikely to change, and the work of the warrior couldn't stop because the needs of the wee boy wouldn't change. Still the warrior is brave, scared and fearless. She had courage, enough to walk into a burning house for that wee boy.

In the previous few years, more than once I had heard myself say that the battle, the work of the warrior was taking a heavy toll, one that I might not survive, that is, the person I was before, might not survive and I knew that when I set out on this road. In my usual wandering around my kitchen, getting some headspace after I'd got the wee boy to sleep, in that in-between time at the end of the day but before I was ready to end my day, I pondered my reasons for applying for the course now. In my awareness that this was a changing track moment, I caught a glimpse of who I used to be and the cavernous gap between then and now, the dissonance and the disconnect between us, and I knew that this was the highest price I'd paid in going into battle with, or is it as, the warrior. I realised the happy girl and the warrior with the dark currency of sad stories couldn't exist in the same space so that must mean that one of them was gone.

During a group supervision session, trying to make sense of the dissonance I felt, the grief at the loss of happy and positive me and my anger at the warrior for what she was costing me, it became clear that what I was trying to articulate was that there are many different stories I tell about myself. The dominant story, of a battle-scarred warrior parent and the other stories that have become less prominent through time and circumstance but that to me feel more authentic. I take my identity from the story I tell. This led to my research question

What is it like to explore some of my key stories and identify those which if they were the dominant story would bring value and authenticity to my life, to my daily lived experience at this time in my life?

Since my own life is my primary source of data (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022) in this thesis I will collect my data through self-observation, journaling (from other times in my life and from the experience of doing this research and being aware of my stories), revisiting photographs (Chang, 2008), memory data (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 1999), and descriptive stories endeavouring to invite the reader into that experience I use, journals from during the course, my writing, my stories from journals and from memory, from other key times in my life – journal from first trip to Canada and from my trips to Medjugorje and other key moments in my spiritual journey. In this thesis, my data, is the contributions of each of my storytellers. Some have shared long stories, some short, some a phrase, a song. Some I knew would be included and others surprised me with their contribution. More surprising again were the stories that weren't included, that weren't shared with me here for inclusion – stories, events that have made, in my mind, a significant impact on my life, on how I tell my story now, but perhaps the story of now is enough without the how-I-got-here story. It may also be that some of these contributors were diligent in their focus on the ethics of sharing their stories – stories where others were involved or could be identifiable. Yes consent could be sought, in some instances to share the details, in others this could be challenging, in terms of working or other power-based relationships.

Ethical considerations

I am both researcher and participant in this study so there are various perspectives to be considered. As a professional studying in the institution where I work, it was important that I was mindful of my roles and consider the material I share. As the research and personal stories emerged it became clear that there were none where I had any concerns in this regard.

Bochner and Ellis, (2016, p 139) talk about relational ethics, the importance of honouring relationships with participants, particularly when topics include personal, experiences and the importance of “mindful self-reflections about the researcher’s role, motives and feelings during the research process”. Many of my stories are personal in nature and while I can actively consent to sharing my information, my family also feature in stories so I must be mindful of their privacy. They are not actively identified by name in the stories. I shared the stories with my husband and children in advance and gave them the opportunity to comment, suggest changes. All were happy with the content. I did not consult with my youngest son, as he is too young to fully understand the implications, so as his mother and in consultation with his father we agreed that there was no potential for harm to him, in including his stories in my stories in this research,

Earlier in the process, I did consider what data would be gathered, how I would manage and store it. However, as the research evolved, the data gathered is my personal information, entries in my personal journals, stories I created. I do not foresee any issue regarding data safety since this is all personal information, that would typically be stored in any private household.

It is also important for me to be ethically aware of any issues which could potentially cause harm to readers. Some topics I include in the research could potentially cause emotional upset to readers. I discuss miscarriage and grief, disability, autism. I use language that to those well-informed, is not the ideal language. I address this early in the thesis to give a trigger warning to my readers.

Although I'm interested in seeing how our #ComeAsYouAre idea turns out, I hadn't planned on sending anything...

Then these short few lines...can I call it a poem?...formed themselves in my head...

*If there was a place where I could be,
the person I am when I am Me.
If there was a place, I felt at home,
safe and secure, and still free to roam,
No need to hide, no time to bide,
where I really, truly felt alive.
No fearful silence, no staying small,
Easy to hear and answer a Call.
What is the story this place would tell?
... I think of the woman at Jacob's well...*

I was surprised by the last line of this poem - I knew the story of the woman at the well, but I don't remember knowing it was Jacob's well, I had to look it up...

As with all things in the Holy Land, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where events occurred, we must rely on stories carried down from the past. "Tradition tells us" is one of the most used phrases when touring Palestine, Israel, or any of the other places featured in the Bible. Tradition tells us that Jacob's well, a well "in the open country" (Genesis 29:2) is where Jesus met the Samaritan woman.

In her story (John 4:3-42) we are told that her life had taken many turns, not all of them kind or helpful for her. She'd had many difficult relationships and found herself excluded and othered by her society because of her life choices and the circumstances in which she found herself. She had to go the well in the midday heat because she was excluded and shunned by the other woman in the village, who all went to the well to draw their water in the cool of the morning. Jesus also stopped by the well at midday and spoke with the woman. As they talked, she realised that He already knew all her stories...

June 2024 – Lava Lamp Label

This is so difficult. Every day I come here, to my desk or to the one-couch and I think...I can't do this ... If I am making judgements from what I see around me, from self-observation, judging me on my actions - I can't do this. I will never have a draft in by Friday (today is Wednesday) or have everything completed by the end of June - less than three weeks from now. It isn't possible and I feel a failure. I feel I am wasting this opportunity, this wonderful time in the border country that I so often speak about in class or think about, I'm wasting this opportunity. There are piles of books and articles and notes on these books and articles all around me - yet there is nothing to show for it. McCormack (2014) and Speedy (2013) are correct when they talk about writing into it, writing into the not knowing, trusting the process - and I believe them, I agree but there is a deadline, and I feel like I am failing. There is another part of me that doesn't believe that - I'm still here trying, I haven't been doing nothing, I have been doing life, and parenting and advocating and working but I haven't been doing writing. I remember when I could remember, when my memory and cognitive function didn't feel like a lava lamp - whereas now every thought floats around independently of the others and there is no possibility of one thought or idea connecting with another one. I forget my ideas, I forget my thoughts, even when I write them down I forget that I wrote them down, or don't know what I mean by the code or abbreviation I used. This is menopause brain-fog, it is real, and it is infuriating, restricting, immobilising, what is the opposite of empowering?...disabling? Yes that is how it feels... disabling.

Interesting choice of words ...disabling. I have used the word disability often, in relation to my son before, usually in a discussion around supports and my insistence on his entitlement to supports. I have used the word not a label as it is often peddled but as a tool, as a currency, as a weapon to advocate for or argue for what he needs. But that is to use the word from the outside, to use it from the inside, to apply it to me,

Disability - "a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions" (Merriman | Webster Dictionary accessed 12/06/2024)

It doesn't feel so empowering or useful now. It feels dis-empowering and at best frustrating and more honestly exhausting and infuriating. I find myself wondering..."is this what it feels like for my son, for my daughter?" Looking from the outside at the task, I know what I have to do but once I start to break it down (and I know that I know how to break it down), it starts to dissipate, I lose my sense of what I should do, what I should do first, what it was I wanted to do, and I can't remember what my idea was and I can't do it... is this how they feel when faced with a task? I am sad to think that this is how difficult things can be for them and I am now grateful that I know this feeling - maybe I can use it to connect with them. When my son can't tell me what he thinks, feels, wants I tell him that I'll "read his brain" ...and I try my best, sometimes I get it right, sometimes not but the more I can know and understand what his experience could be, the better my Mum-inspired guess will be.

Transferable Skills?

When I advise mature students or those changing career area on how to build a CV, the most common challenge they see, is how to make all their past experience relevant, particularly if it is in a different industry and the skills aren't obviously relevant to their new area of interest.

We talk about a Skills based CV where the focus is on the skills that they have used in the past, naming these skills and giving examples of how they have used these skills. This can be a challenging process, and it often helps to break it down into smaller steps. I advise "first write down everything you've ever done in any of your past roles, this will be far too long but don't worry that can be sorted out later". Then when all that information is in one place, identify what are the key skills you need to list – these will usually match the job description, or you might like to list all the skills you can think of as a starting point and then narrow it down later to match a specific job description.

Then start working through all the duties, the tasks, the list of everything that you have done in any of your past roles and put them under the relevant skill heading. As you do you will start to see duplication and you won't have to keep listing the same task again. Finally, combine or polish up the language. It can take a few drafts to get this done and it will be very messy and perhaps overwhelming to start with, but it will be worth it when it is done.

Dancing in the Border Country

I found another theme song, Leanne Womack's #IHopeYouDance, I still love this song. It is the story of a mother giving advice to her daughter on how she would like her to think about her life. Always keeping her sense of wonder, being grateful, trusting in faith, being aware of something greater than her at play in the world, and when faced with the chance to "sit it out or dance.... I hope you dance." I took this advice to heart too, seek out adventures to add to my story, be these travel, emotional, spiritual, or educational and career adventures, I wanted to be open to saying yes to new chapters and new characters in my story.

I wrote in my journal on a flight back from Canada "... *I don't want to turn into the old Natasha... Take any chance that is going, when it feels right – never ever be lazy about taking what life is offering you*" (Personal Journal, February 1998).

One of these new chapters was training as a guidance counsellor in UCD from 1999-2000. This was the first time I was in education where I felt fully engaged and committed. Looking back at what was my first visit, as an adult to the border country of education I was so enthusiastic, inspired and positive. Now at the start of this journey in September 2023, I was battle weary and battle scared, traumatised and overwhelmed and while getting out to the border country again was good, the comparison, is easy to see (and difficult to look at), am not who I was back then. Or at least, the story I tell is different. Looking around though, the experience of education is the same. Earlier this year, writing about my initial guidance course, I said "*the time in the border country felt like home. It was challenging and I felt out of my depth a lot, but I also felt included, accepted, valued and skilled. This was a role I would be very good at. It was something I'd always wanted to do, I just hadn't known before.*" (Personal Research Journal, March 2024). Looking back now, I can absolutely say the same about my experience on this course this year. Might it be that the study of, and reflection on, guidance counselling is where I go to find my way forward?

When I lived alone, I used to put both postcards and pictures of me in those places, all around my apartment. Not because, as my sister suggested, I loved looking at pictures of myself but because it kept the narrative fresh in my mind. This is me; this is what I've done and where I've been, this is my story, she in those pictures, she is my Story.

At some stage that changed, the photos became wedding photos and baby pictures, and finger paintings and drawings and an assortment of kiddie photos and creative artistic treasures and the pictures of me disappeared – I'm behind the camera, capturing the first chapters of other stories. Stories that amazingly I'll forget and others I tell over and over to little people creating their own stories.

Between the Mountains

It was while working on my route into guidance counselling and embracing my newfound love of travel, and a drive to see the positive, the brave, that I found myself with a group of Irish pilgrims in the space "between the mountains". A small town in Bosnia and Hercegovina, west Hercegovina to be precise, very close to the Croatian border. This is where the spiritual side to my story really found its home. It was here on the third week in May 1999 that I truly felt (like the dream from long ago) accompanied on my journey. That while my life was mine to write, it was also woven into a bigger story, that things in my story would matter in the stories of others, that I could trust Him that my story would be a good one, not necessarily a happy-all-the-time one but it would be the one that it should be. (Walking holding His Hand, inviting Him into my story, talking through the twists and turns with Him would mean that I would go where I should and all would be well).

I came back from Medjugorje, inspired, forgiving and forgiven, and trusting in God's presence in my life and plan in my life.

It is funny how things work out, I took another trip to Medjugorje in July 2000, I'd just finished my guidance qualification in UCD was enjoying some downtime and applying for lot of jobs, CVs and interviews, and being open to what would come my way. I saw an ad in the newspaper for a maternity leave role in Athlone Institute of Technology, I still remember reading the ad, in my Dad's newspaper as we were getting ready to eat lunch together in our kitchen in Donegal.

He was on holidays from school but as a school principal still went to school most days for a few hours in the morning to take care of what needed his attention.

We'd have lunch together most days, usually a summer salad - the weather was lovely that summer - and we'd chat about football. Donegal football wasn't a great story those days compared to the amazing years we'd had in the late eighties and early nineties, when we travelled to all the games together. Those were such fun days, so many games in Clones, Co. Monaghan, just on the border with Fermanagh and where if we were lucky, we'd only lose an hour in traffic at the British Army checkpoint on the border between North and South. Sitting at the kitchen table, looking at the ad that day I said, "I think this is my job". I remember thinking that this would give great experience to build on. He didn't love the idea, only a four-month contract as opposed to the year-long job in Mayo that I'd recently interviewed for, and he was sure I'd get. But I knew, although I had no experience working in third level guidance, I knew this was my job, so I applied.

I went to Medjugorje and instead of going for one week as usual, I was offered an extra week free of charge because of an overbooking and the need to facilitate someone else getting back to Ireland. On the day before I flew out, I got a call for an interview for the Athlone job. It was scheduled during that second week I'd be away. So, should I change my plans and come home for the interview? No, I knew I couldn't, taking my spiritual storyline as my dominant story, there was no way I was moving off this track and if I missed the opportunity then it wasn't for me anyway. They offered me an alternate interview date when I returned from Medjugorje, and I got the job. I moved to Athlone, by the beautiful River Shannon, on the border between Westmeath and Roscommon.

While we often think of faith in terms of religious beliefs, Hamblly (2011, p.33) describes faith as a state rather than an opinion, “a way of being that enables people to have the courage to face rather than avoid uncertainty and anxiety.” From a psychological perspective an optimistic or positive mindset, like the Happy Girl who was Awesome in Canada in 1998 (Wells, 2015), which fosters a sense of well-being. It can be that this optimistic mindset, can be fostered through religious practices that encourage finding positive meaning in experiences (Fredrickson, 2002).

In my experience challenging or traumatic circumstances can eventually derail a positive mindset or break a connection with faith-based meaning making. For me the alternative negative story became dominant even when I didn't want it to. Then worse still I found myself on a track where the dark currency of a sad and negative story, a focus on deficits, is what works to get what is needed, and any attempted shift by anyone towards a positive mindset is perceived as a threat. That is, if they tell me that my son is doing great, I am immediately terrified that they will take away some of the very few supports he has. Within a few seconds, the limbic system is being chased by a bear, I'm in fight or flight and clinging on to the negative story for dear life in case he loses any of the nowhere-near-enough supports I fought so hard to get and he desperately needs.

Career(s) Girl

Turns out I didn't stay long in Athlone, the experience was a brilliant stepping-stone and after a few weeks I interviewed for, and got a job at NUI, Maynooth as it was known then. Different from coastal Donegal or Athlone where water was always in sight, Maynooth was landlocked on the border of Kildare and Meath. I liked it here though, a small but not too small town, with beautiful tree-lined wide main street. I rented an apartment on the edge of the main street and still clearly remember my Dad driving away after moving all my belongings from Athlone. I stood looking out from my balcony and thinking "there isn't enough paper" needed for me to write everything that felt just then. The amazement of having moved through two new jobs in a new career area within two months, having an apartment all to myself, my own space both physically and in my head. A new town to call home, my own life far from where I began... brave new territory, I was sometimes anxious, apprehensive but as Susan Jeffers would say "It's a ~~struggle~~ an adventure". (Jeffers, 2007 p. 37)

At first it was great. I enjoyed the skilled helping (Egan, 2001), the information, the making a difference. It could at times be challenging - new, am I good enough but certainly at the start I felt confident in my abilities, in my training, in myself. Unfortunately, I didn't have much else to keep me occupied outside of work, so I was happy to take work home, try to work in the evenings and even if I didn't work in the evenings, I started to literally and figurately carry my work around with me, and it started to become a big part of who I was, it became my identity, my Story. I was happy with this, then.

These were also fun years...the spiritual story continued.

I found my way to St Catherine's, a little oratory on the university campus, although it was set apart and separate from the university, it was situated, not on the edge but right in the centre of things. There I found a wonderful community of friends who would come there for a few minutes' quiet prayer or Adoration, or to the Tuesday night Charismatic Prayer Meeting or just for a

cuppa and a chat in the dining room. There was always a welcome there, I'd wander in on my way to the office or on my way home, talk to The Lord, bring my prayers, chat like friends do, tell Him what I needed help with, who I'd heard about or knew that needed His help. More than once, I talked about wanting to find a husband, someone who could share this faith journey with me. Always a fan of specifics and symbolism, I asked Him that if, whenever someone I had yet to meet, fell in love with me and wanted to marry me, could He please arrange it so that he would propose to me in the little oratory in St Catherine's. That would mean that Jesus would absolutely definitely be there too - it would be a sign, a confirmation that this was the right guy, and I'd want Him to be there with us too. I never told anyone about that prayer. Over the years St Catherine's became an anchor, a safe space and it kept me grounded and positive and trusting even in the times when life was hard.

I wanted to meet a kind man, one that also knew The Lord, one that would share the faith story with me... I asked often, prayed often, thanked in expectant faith often, and vented at the lack of obvious results to my prayers quite often too. Then one Tuesday evening a new guy came to our prayer meeting.

So, what happened with the new guy?

12 December, 2004 was the day after my birthday, six months after our first date. We'd gone ice-skating and out for dinner, I'd wondered if there was any chance, he might ask the question at the restaurant. He was nervous, so I thought he might be planning to ask... he didn't. The next day was Sunday and after Mass we went to St Catherine's to spend some time in the Oratory. The few others in there left one by one so that we were the only two left there with Jesus. And then... "Will you marry me?" he asked me, and like I'd answered in my dreams and in my prayers, so many times before I'd even met him, I said "yes!".

And we lived happily ever after – we got married, he built us a house in the country, right on the border of two townlands, we had three wonderful little people, two girls and then a boy, and life was good, and a lot and sometimes overwhelming. I worked half-time and my favourite job was being their mum. I was good at it, we had fun, and trips to the library and the shops, our little routines. I still have the card from my, then four-year-old eldest daughter telling me “*You are the best at beeing my Mum*”. Still to this day that gives me comfort.

I liked how Galman (2011) using autoethnography to explore mothering, spirituality and work, writes about images, in her case the “balancing scales”, to illustrate her thoughts and feelings around the idea of a work/life balance and her spiritual, religious traditions.

It was validating to me, particularly in the context of inclusion, or not being excluded, being heard, and not feeling the need to be silent, to see reference to spirituality in research that also referred to work and life issues.

The track, the dominant story was changing though – nothing dramatic, just a gradual sway in direction. There wasn't time for the spiritual side, well that's not true, there was, I just chose to spend the time elsewhere, I needed headspace too and quiet time and mammy time and so I just didn't choose it, didn't choose Him. There were little diversions back to that track and that story – the spectacular car crash on the M4 where I walked away without a scratch and the word miracle was used many times by strangers and professionals and friends in discussing the events of that day. But still the track had changed.

Then the other Crash came, this time economic, and things changed again, I went back to work full-time, and my husband became a stay-at-home dad. My focus shifted to work but there was always the hope that maybe we'd have more babies.

The Little Man's Mam.

I sat on the bed with my little man beside me, three years old, and tucked in safely between me and the wall. He was excited about the next part and wanted to play on my phone too. I remember saying,

"Look at the machine and the doctor will show you the baby on the baby tv."

I wondered what he'd think seeing his new brother or sister, both he and his two only slightly older sisters couldn't wait for this baby to come. A mixture of distracted and focused on the little man, it took me a minute to register that this scan was different from the one two weeks earlier. The Doc is not normally so quiet.

"Doc, are we ok?" I asked, somewhat unnecessarily because I could clearly see his face.

"No", was all he said.

"...again?" I asked.

"What, seriously?", My husband looks shocked. Remembering it now, is like being back in that room...I can feel everything slowing down, except my heartbeat, getting quiet, except the little man still playing on my phone.

I know the drill, another scan just to be sure. I try to prepare the little man, saying sometimes babies go back to Heaven...maybe our baby will go back to Heaven.

"No, it won't", he says, as if I had made a ridiculous, unbelievable, practically impossible suggestion.

We wait for another scan, this waiting room is always quiet, no small talk, just knowing almost imperceptible nods to the others who don't want to be here either.

We wait to hear "there's no heartbeat" and then we're back with the Doc.

"We'll need to do the procedure today", he tells me.

I know that drill too. I make eye contact with Doc and signal that we need to tell the little man.

Doc says, "the baby was too small, so he is going back to heaven to be with God".

The little man never raises his head from the phone, but I can see the red glow spreading out through his usually happy little face".

Upstairs we wait for a bed in a ward. Sitting in the corner of an office, between a filing cabinet, a desk and a lot of supply boxes, the little man is sad, and confused. I tell him again and again "the baby has to go back to heaven". I can see the midwife at the storage cupboard listening to this gorgeous little man ask his questions. Then without any warning he takes my face in his tiny little hands and looks me in the eye,

"But you're not going to heaven are you, you mackle head?".

What did it cost him to ask me that question? What did he think could happen today? I understood that to make the question askable he had to soften it, in his language a mackle head is a silly-billy, a jokey term to try to take the fear from the question. The midwife turned to look at us, with shock and sympathy in her eyes.

"We'll take great care of your Mammy, she'll be ok", she reassured him.

I said, "Of course I'm not going to heaven today".

That's when it happened, I switched tracks. This wasn't the time for grief; to show it, or to feel it, this was the time to mind this little man and later today break the news to his sisters and try to help them understand how something so sad and incomprehensible to minds and hearts of 5-year-olds, 4-year-olds and 3-year-olds could be happening in their family. Later my husband told me that after they left me at the hospital the little man didn't settle all day until it was time for them all to come back to get me. He spent the next two weeks sitting on the other pillow in my bed, watching over me. And I spent the time, loving and minding and reassuring him that I was ok, and he was safe, and everything would be ok. My husband bought another tree and planted it with the others in our garden...we have five trees now...

In my need to parent and take care of my little people, I didn't realise that I'd missed the road to feeling the grief. I just felt shock, disbelief – how was I this person? How was this my story? How was this happening to me, why? This can't be The plan. Put it all away and don't look at it, that hole is so black and so deep, if I look it in the eye, I may be swallowed whole. I may disappear into it, never to be seen again...is it already too late?... I was shaken to my core, and I was angry with Him.

In my initial introduction to the border country, McCormack (2014 p.166) referenced what Green (2012) described as a “liminal zone of depression, anxiety, grief and loss on the road to transformation”. This did not resonate with me at that time and even later for me this liminal space, this in-between place of transformation was an escape and an opportunity. However, as I wandered in this territory now, it seems that for me, Green was correct.

Six babies

From October 2012 to February 2015 we'd lose five babies, without any medical confirmation, but as their mum I know, three were boys and two were girls. The girls stayed with me a very short time, the boys a little longer, they really tried, but all went “back to Heaven” were the words we used to explain it to the three little people here.

With each trip to the hospital, with our visits to Glasnevin, when I'd look at the photo of the tiny white coffin that fit in the palm of my hand, with each “failure” as I saw it, Quinn, (2022), I turned further from Him. I was so hurt and so angry. I've seen Him work; I know what He can do. He knows, I know and yet my babies died... was it because I had already wandered away from Him, I know He isn't vengeful, He doesn't keep score but if I had prayed more might at least one of my babies have stayed?

This was the darkest time. I've never heard cries, howls, noise like that before - I've heard it said, that the sound from a mother who has lost a child is a haunting, unnatural sound and that makes perfect sense to me - losing a child is an unnatural thing, of course the sound of that pain is unnatural. When I did let those sounds out, dared to look towards the black hole where the grief monster dwelled, it was usually in my car. It was when I was alone and in-between places, again on the edge, the border country where grief and everyday life skirted around each other on the way to somewhere else. Mostly though, I tried to shut it all away. I thought kiddies needed me to be or seem happy and honestly if I looked directly at that big black dark hole, the grief monster would devour me, and I would be gone.

It also seems that pushing grief down doesn't make it go away, it finds a way to be heard, it sends its co-workers anxiety and fear out in its place. I became so anxious about nothing and everything that I finally sought out someone to talk to. It helped to be heard, to tell this story in a place where I felt freer to fall apart...to share what I truly felt... I didn't like this path, didn't want this path, it felt sad and hopeless, and I felt abandoned, by Him and by me - the real me, the Happy Girl, she was no longer here.

"Might she ever come back?" my counsellor asked one summer evening.

I recall looking at the painting of the butterfly on the wall in the corner of the room...I was very familiar with that painting now.

"I don't think so." I said.

And I meant it, from where I sat that evening, it felt almost impossible that she could ever return. The happy, spiritual, joy filled story would never be heard, never be told again.

Chester (2003), in her autoethnography telling the story of her lived experience of infertility, grief and stigma, draws on her spiritual awareness in sense-making, not to make sense because that can't be done but to look into it.

She talks about the journey from private agony to chronic public stigma, reminding me of our journey and the desire with the first few miscarriages, to have the news known, to have people know about my babies because they were real, they were

here. As time and number of losses went on, the public stigma (Goffman, 1990), shame, scrutiny of “fighting fate” became almost unbearable and it was “easier” to go through it all in silence (Quinn, 2022). Chester (2003) uses scripture verses at different times, as an illustration of her thoughts or how her experiences weren’t aligned with the positive, happy ending, answered prayers, messages in the Bible. Until what she calls the “re-storying” (Grant & Zeeman, 2012) of her life, the reframing of her dominant story, her transformational experience – she realised that she was not the only one God had said “No” to - in the Easter Story, Jesus had asked on Holy Thursday “if it is possible let this chalice pass from me” (Matthew 26:39). God had said no.

The West Wing – Two Cathedrals (Sorkin et al., 2001)

My favourite episode... The American president is angry with God. His secretary of many years, Mrs Landingham, was killed in a car accident, driving her first ever brand-new car she was hit by a drunk driver and killed. This happens while the President is about to announce to the nation that he hid his Multiple Sclerosis (MS) diagnosis when running for election so there will be investigations and implications, and it is time to run for re-election. At her funeral service, alone in Washington National Cathedral after the service he rails at God.

He tells God he won't run for election again, because he felt he was trying to do his best, in his role as president he was trying to do his best, and he doesn't like being questioned, doesn't like showing shortcomings and he is angry with God, that Mrs. Landingham was killed and that he is facing this storm with the MS revelation. There is also the underlying metaphor of a storm, making its way up the Atlantic coast. It turns out that this tropical storm, lashing Washington DC, is occurring out of season, never happened before, so the president is wondering why it is happening now. Also, the outside door of the Oval Office keeps blowing open for no reason - explained only by some weird wind tunnel phenomenon happening in the White House these days. As the storm lashes the White House and the president has an imagined conversation with Mrs. Landingham, bringing him back to another time that she challenged him to use his abilities and power for good, the door again swings open.

The president walks outside and stands in the rain, facing the downpour, looking up, we can't hear it, but we know he is having another conversation, eyes still fixed on the sky... he knows someone greater than him is there, showing His power. He ignores an offer of a coat, he wants to feel the storm. While in the background we hear Dire Straits "Brothers in Arms", he walks through the corridors of the West Wing, all the while lightning, emphasising the ever-present power of the storm, flashes in the background, as the president and his entourage ride in a motorcade to the waiting press conference. On the way they pass the cathedral where earlier he had argued with God. Still not wearing a coat, he takes another moment to stand, lightning still flashing, in the face of the storm, feeling the power of the rain, before walking into the building and directly to the podium. We know there is a safe and easy option, ask a friendly reporter the first question - he doesn't do this. He takes a question asking the hard questions, is he going to run for re-election. We also know from earlier in the episode that when he has made up his mind to do something that he puts his hands in his pockets, looks away and smiles - we know without a word being said that he has changed his mind. He's made peace with God, he won't step back, he won't take the easy way out, he will run for re-election, he will continue to fight, to use his power for good.

I love this episode or more specifically the final five minutes of this episode, where he realises that the storm isn't a normal natural occurrence at this time of the year, that something or someone greater is at play here. In February 2015 I remember watching these final five minutes of the episode over and over again. Even now when I watch it, I feel in equal measures heartbroken and inspired. I loved it then (and now) because I can identify with it. Like Jed, the US President, I've been a devout Catholic all my life, I know Jesus and I know He knows me. In February 2015 I had my fifth miscarriage. After being blessed with three wonderful children and relatively uneventful pregnancies I could not grasp why this was happening to me, again and again. More than once, I wondered why He had forsaken me. I know His Power, I believe in Him and His Power and yet He allowed five of my babies to leave before I could meet them. Why?

What had I done to deserve this? But what troubled me most was, how, why was this now my story? With multiple miscarriages, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, meaning that the likelihood of a subsequent “successful” pregnancy (Dimitriadis, E., Menkhorst, E., Saito, S., Kutteh, W.H., & Brosens, J.J., 2020) is decreased, it means that the grief that comes is complex (Quinn, 2022) to me this is not only a story of grief but of failure.

The president's anger and frustration at the unfairness of Mrs. Landingham's death, at the difficult position he found himself in, in many ways mirrored my own. Through my life I've seen Him in action, I've known where His Hand has been in things that have happened or didn't happen but this plan, my babies, I couldn't get on board with this, this was a bad plan, a mean plan, a hurtful plan and I didn't deserve it. Even now when I listen to Brothers in Arms, I can hear the rain, I can feel my lip quiver, and my eyes fill with tears. I can also feel a warmth spread in my chest as my heart quickens with inspiration. Like Jed, the scene with the storm reminds me that I believe that there are things greater than me, things greater than I can understand (Isaiah 55:8-9), and as heartbreaking as losing my babies was and is, I ~~knew~~ know that He has me (Jeremiah 1:5), I know that He guides my way (Psalm 23:3-4).

What about the one that stayed?

The hard work started to work... by telling and re-telling the grief story, the “I failed, I know this was something I did wrong, and you won't convince me otherwise” story, the “my baby died” story, I started to talk about feelings again. I was starting to remember her and just as I was finding my feet and finding a way to navigate this new territory, accepting that I'd be sad because my babies died and sad that I wouldn't have another baby who would stay, it seems I was wrong.

This pregnancy felt like uncharted territory, and it tested my courage (Quinn, 2022). I was so fearful that something would go wrong at the beginning, it was almost unbearable. He did stay though, everything went smoothly, blessed even, everyone who had played a role in my time in the hospital over the past six years seemed to just wander past my bed or into my room to meet him. Every "i" and "t" dotted and crossed, and a beautiful, healthy, perfect baby boy became the centre of my story.

Having the wee boy was amazing, exhausting, but amazing. His sisters and brother were so thrilled with him and full of love for him. I quite often would look back over my journey to become his mother, where I came from and where it was taking me and ponder how blessed I was with the happy ending to the stories of all my babies.

I wonder is it possible to re-story my life, to genuinely and consciously switch the tracks, as that image had shown me years before? Could I move from this land of dark-currency and negative focus? Where would I go?

First Things First

It started in my car, driving to a Parent's Association meeting at the wee boy's school. In the evening of another long day where I felt like staying at home, where I felt the burden of having to speak up. It wasn't that I didn't want to, I did, well at least in the context of the life I live. Before I knew this story, I had no need to speak up for me and mine and no awareness to speak up for others. But now, I know better. It felt hard, give me a job and I'll go and do it, but this, building relationships, carrying an agenda (even if sometimes it stays in my bag), nudging for change, this costs me, I don't feel confident or comfortable doing it. I feel exposed and afraid. In the car, going even though I was too tired, I said to Him, "Just give me something, tell me something" - and I turned on the car radio. The song playing was called #FirstThingsFirst



Image 9 Selected Lyrics from First Things First

It hit me immediately, a clear message, "turn back to Me and keep your eyes on Me," the unsaid there being that when I do that, He'll take care of everything else (Psalm 16:8).

The next day my husband suggested, for not even the tenth time, that I take some time out to get some spiritual sustenance. I always say no, because I can't or won't leave the wee boy or have too much to do or am too tired but this time, I knew I would go. It wasn't lost on me that the event, running over two days, was taking place in the literal border country, in the countryside of County Louth.

At the start of the day, one of the leaders asked people, in the context of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, what they came here for - I knew exactly what I needed, what I wanted - I spoke out, "Courage!".



The Goodness of God

All my days, I've been held in your hands...
And all my life you have been faithful
And all my life you have been so, so good
With every breath that I am able
Oh, I will sing of the goodness of God

Your goodness is running after, it's running
after me..
You have led me through the fire
And in darkest night you are close like no other
I've known you as a Father
I've known you as a Friend
And I have lived in the goodness of God,
And all my life you have been faithful,

Image 10 Selected Lyrics from The Goodness of God

As soon as I heard the words of #TheGoodnessOfGod, I cried and cried, I remembered...

When my children were first minded by someone else, often they were happy as I left, would be ok while I was gone and then cry as soon as they saw me on my return, maybe letting out the emotion of having missed me, or only now realizing that I'd been gone for a long time, and they were so happy to be reunited with me. This was like that, except that He'd never left, this time I was the child and I'd left, or at least turned away. He was still there, at my shoulder or following behind me, never gone, not even out of sight, had I just turned around to look for Him. Even now, I can feel what that feels like...an unconditional hug from a loving parent...my heart warms and my eyes fill up...

I texted my husband...

" OK with you if I come back tomorrow.?" ... I already knew what his answer would be.

On the second day, when they prayed with people individually, they asked me what I was praying for,

" ... Wisdom and lots and lots of Courage."

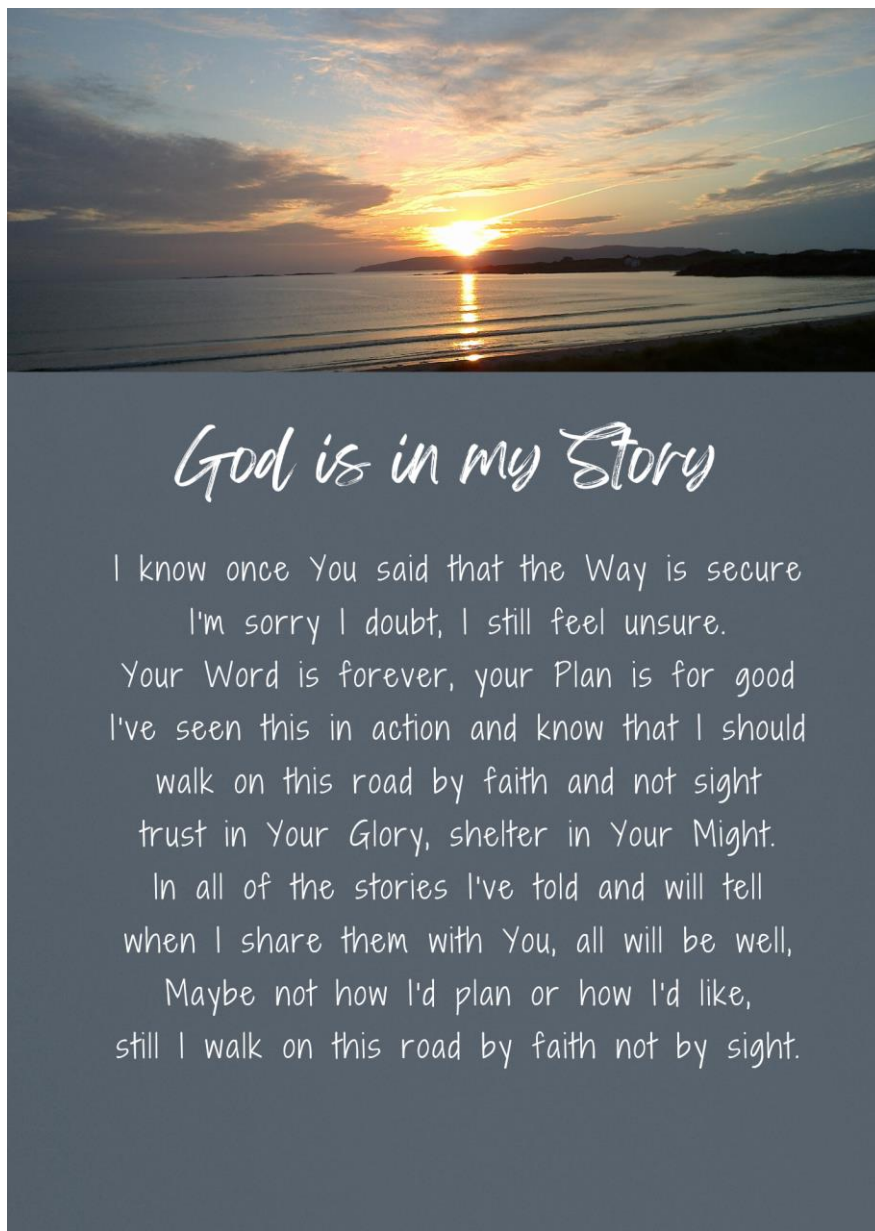
I wrote in my journal before I left that day so that I would not forget what happened next.

"When she prayed with me, she said that she could see an image of a Warrior with a sword. That is amazing, thank you, confirmation that the Warrior doesn't have to be bloodied and dark, she can be used for good, she has a purpose, and I am not alone. Jesus showed her that image, so I would know that He sees me, He has seen my battles and He'll guide me. She told me to read about Esther in the Bible - her calling was to use her position of power to influence and help others (Genesis 12:2-3,7). I am amazed to hear the warrior Word come in prayer. All this time I have had a negative association with her, but she can do the Lord's work...with His Word as a Spirit-inspired sword (Ephesians 6:17) in every place where I find myself. She is a righteous, fierce and love filled Warrior, not angry or vengeful. Not a vigilante on a quest but a righteous, upright warrior on an inspired mission." (Personal Research Journal, January 2024).

I came home wearing my new, or more accurately new-found, courage on my sleeve, literally, one of the organisers spontaneously handing me his wristband, as I was leaving, it was red with just one word... Courage.

Even though I was exhausted I smiled all the way home, even on the part where I missed the turn for Emerald Park and Google maps sent me on every little road it could find until I reached Dunshaughlin - it was an adventure. I took me about 2 hours to get home but really I was back on track long before that.

Looking back now, whether by a gradual steering away or a more traumatic jumping of the tracks, I had lost sight of the positive, optimistic Me. The dominant Story had shifted to a track where everything was a battle, I felt I had no power, no agency, no control. It was only after the trip to the Border Country in Louth and the acknowledgement of the Warrior-for-good, that I came to recognise that I had some control. Circumstances, mostly stayed as they were, but I had control over the Story I told. About the same time, another song found its way into my playlist – God is in this Story...and I took this as a confirmation that I was on the right track, that He was listening and that I was hearing Him. A poem formed itself in my heart.



God is in my Story

I know once You said that the Way is secure
I'm sorry I doubt, I still feel unsure.
Your Word is forever, your Plan is for good
I've seen this in action and know that I should
walk on this road by faith and not sight
trust in Your Glory, shelter in Your Might.
In all of the stories I've told and will tell
when I share them with You, all will be well,
Maybe not how I'd plan or how I'd like,
still I walk on this road by faith not by sight.

Image 11: Poem by Natasha (June 2024)

In recent times, when wondering about how wide I can throw the net with this new Story, I felt connection with Hambly's work on career decision making and the role of prayer, meditation and discernment. This contemplative process she describes as "...not a matter of sending out a request and passively waiting for a response, but rather a discipline requiring attention and effort. At the heart of this discipline is the ability to create space for and to listen to one's inner voice and feelings." (Hambly, 2011 p.35) The sense of agency is restored here but is combined with a sense of, to me anyway, not being alone in my endeavours.

God is in the Story

As I wandered through this border country, and revisited and sat with the stories and sharings that have been presented to me from my past, I know that the authentic dominant Story, the Story were I feel inclusion and belonging, where I feel most content, albeit not always happy, is one where there is a spiritual focus, where I openly acknowledge my faith, to myself and perhaps to others. Now I wonder, should I explain what I mean by faith here, seek out a definition? An obvious start, in my eyes, would be to say that I take a Christian and a Catholic perspective – perspective sounds so impersonal when I talk about faith because to me faith is difficult to explain because it is the belief in things unseen – "For we walk by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Even that isn't enough though - I believe in Jesus; I know He is real because I believe it, that is my reality and I could say I have no concrete evidence of that but from where I stand that's not accurate, I've heard His Word speak to me, I've had experiences and seen images I believe were inspired and send from Him.

Seeking out some scholarly support, to explain this further in this thesis, I felt that Smith (2015), could express exactly what I wanted to. Writing about discernment and the inner witness, he says that there are two questions that every Christian should be able to answer. First, what I think Jesus is saying to me in relation to challenges and opportunities I face at this stage in my life and secondly how can I be sure that it is Jesus that is speaking to me?

Discernment implies three concepts, insight, discretion and judgement and that having the ability to use these would answer our yearning to “know the voice of Jesus at critical moments of our lives” and that “the ability to discern the voice of Jesus is a critical spiritual skill, basic to our capacity to make vocational and moral choices” (Smith, 2015 p.10)

Believing, as I do, that God speaks to us in many ways, we can be confident in the “inner witness when we recognise each way in which God speaks to us, whether it be through Scripture, through a prophetic word that comes within the community of faith or through the structures of the living church” (Smith, 2015 p.10). Part of the Christian life is the desire and capacity to respond “..personally and intentionally to the promptings of the Spirit... to walk in the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit”.

He also asks how can “we recognise the voice of Jesus through the inner witness of his Spirit to our hearts”? In my experience God, has shown immense creativity and inclusion in how He speaks to me. Much as I know my wee boy’s communication channels and idiosyncratic language, God has found ways to communication with me in ways that He knows I will understand,.

Smith expresses a similar understanding, saying that this presence of the inner witness of the Spirit can make a “direct impression on our inner consciousness” such that “the Spirit of God can and will make a direct, unmediated impression on the heart and mind of the Christian believer. It is possible to experience this witness and know with confidence that this is the inner work of the holy Spirit – to know it is the voice of Jesus”. (Smith, 2015 p. 10)

“For us as individuals, the danger is that we might never develop an inner life. It is easy to live by duty, the expectations of others, the duties of our work and the inertia of culture and religious traditions... With a well-developed interior life, we live our lives in response to the Spirit. We choose to live that which we are called to live – our life, not some else’s life” (Smith, 2015 p. 16-17).

This is exactly what I’ve found through exploring the changing tracks, the moving from one dominant story to another. The Story I want to live, that I am content living, is one where there is room for the Spirit, where I feel connected to my faith and to the voice of Jesus.

Like when I gave my research journal “the silent treatment” over Christmas, because I was disappointed in and angry with myself and I didn’t want to talk to me or about me, so too, I have done this with Jesus. When the plan has seemed unfair, too hard or just mean, when I know what He can do and He knows I know what He can do, I stopped speaking to Him and stopped listening to Him. Looking back now, it feels that when I stopped talking to Him, I lost myself, when I stopped looking at Him, I lost sight of myself.

Belonging

In these past few days where writing, or writing anything of value, seemed impossible, I’ve wandered around my kitchen, sat on the floor, put my head on the table, stood facing the wall, sat staring off into space, whimpered, sighed, groaned and even cried. I feel completely overwhelmed, completely out of my depth and unable to withstand the onslaught of work that is needed. In each of those moments, someone who loves me comes along and tells me “I believe in you” or “you’ve got this”, “keep going, you’ll do it”, “you can do this”, “we’re proud of you”.



Image 12: Maghery Beach, Co. Donegal. August 2023. Natasha Marron

We were in Donegal on our summer holidays and as it not uncommon the weather was awful, particularly awful in fact, rainy and cold every day. On the first day that it didn't rain we decided that today was beach day - in any normal circumstances it was far too cold for the beach, but it could be the best day that we got so we needed to go. The sky was grey, it matched the grey sand and the grey sea. The Atlantic was icy cold and foamy rough, with the biggest waves I've ever seen at that beach. I had told my kids earlier in the summer that I'd try sea swimming - apparently it is great for the metabolism so maybe it could work a shoreline-waistline miracle for me. My wetsuit, the only semblance of protection from the cold didn't fit anymore so I had to brave the ocean with only a swimsuit, almost no protection from exposure to the elements at the edge of west Donegal. Since I'd told them I'd do it, there was no backing out. One thing parents of autistic children know, is that modelling behaviour is the key to a lot. I said I would, it was hard, and I was anxious about the cold, I had doubts about doing it, but I would be brave, I would push through and do it. It is important to know that I don't like being in the ocean, I'm afraid of sharks, really afraid of sharks. Yes, I am aware that there isn't a huge shark problem off west Donegal, but my limbic system won't be told and once I see waves or open water, fight or flight is never far away. I'll still do it, for the kids, I said I would, so I will. First up to my ankles, then my knees, it was icy, but the real problem was the seaweed, dense and clingy. I take four or five steps through dense, terrifying uncertainty (yes I know there aren't sharks in the seaweed but by this stage my heart is pounding because the limbic system just can't be sure so best be prepared!). I make it past the seaweed only to realise I am now up to my chest in water, and I can't breathe... the cold is...it is impossible to get a clear breath in... the cold is assaulting.... But "look at me... I did it"

"Well done Mammy, I so proud of you" my eldest daughter tells me in the words my youngest son would use.

"I can't breathe...it's so cold...wait what's..." I'm under the water...I can feel salt in my nose and my throat. I get back up and can't get breath because there's

water in my mouth and nose. But I'm ok. The waves are huge...if I time it properly I can jump into it and the buoyancy will lift me up and drop me just the right side of the break. I jump again but too late and I'm under water again... I jump up, coughing and flailing but too late, I'm down again... I can't breathe, this won't stop, it keeps coming, how will I cope, there is no end in sight...the waves keep coming.

The three older kids are jumping into one wave after another, up and down, over and sometimes under, laughing, loving it.

But me... "I can't cope, it is too much", I remember thinking, then "what is too much?" I ask myself "the keeping going, it keeps coming, it isn't stopping" ..." Do you want to get out"

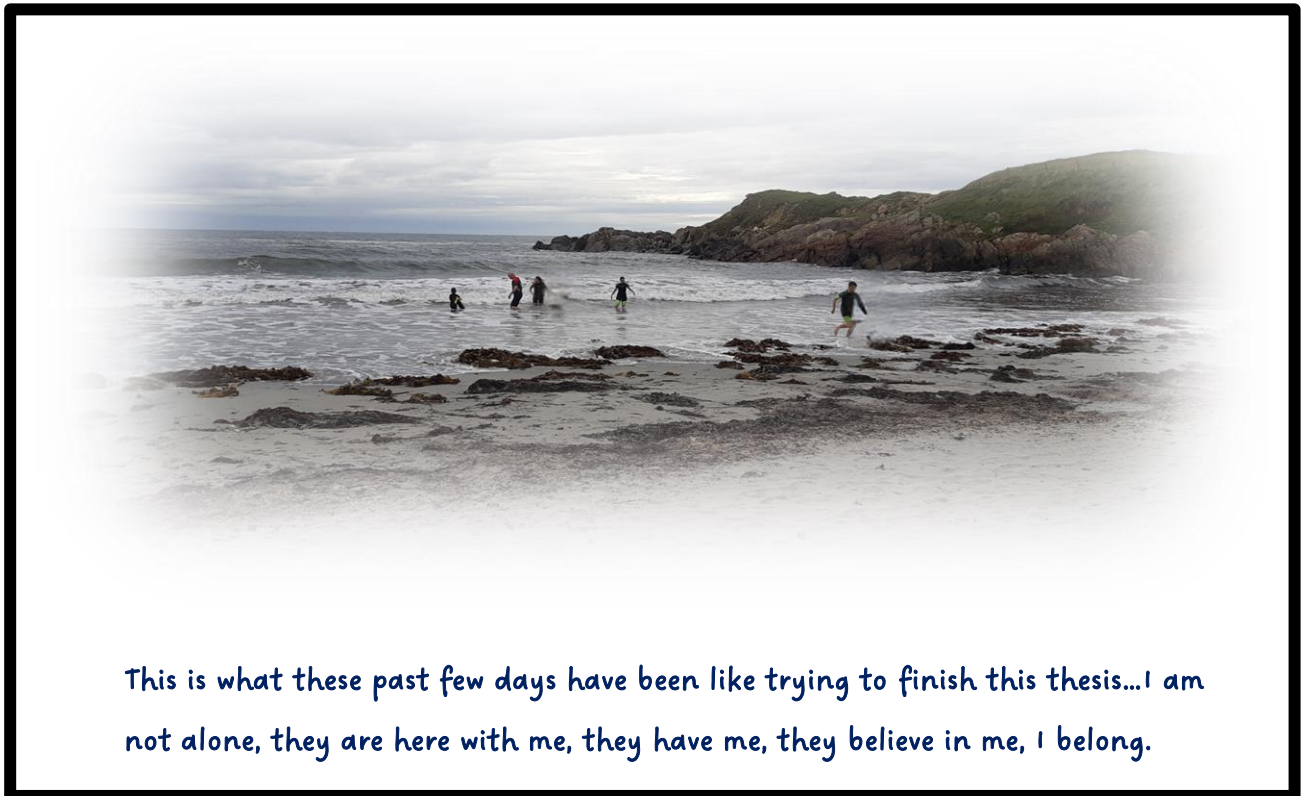
"Yes definitely", "but no, I want to push through too" "but I can't push through" "But I want to".

I look to the shore, my husband is playing with the youngest wee boy, he's reenacting Titanic at the edge of the water, even there the waves pack a punch. They see me and wave, they're proud of me...I just know.

I decide I'm getting out, but I have to get through the seaweed and part of me wants to stay...I like the challenge, I am proud of me too but it just keeps coming and I can't see a break in the waves, a moment to catch my breath, a moment of peace and safety where a waves won't knock me over or send me under...so I head for the seaweed. This time it is worse, it is clinging to my legs and around my feet and I can't step out of it, there is too much of it, and my heart is pounding, my throat is tightening, the seaweed is wrapped around my ankles too...there is no way to get out of it and I'm in the middle of it... I've left the kids in the waves and the others are on the shore and I must keep plodding through this and I'm scared, overwhelmingly, illogically scared. "I know I'm ok.. I know I'll be ok" I think, but nothing can calm the pounding heart and I start to stagger, my head and my chest moving faster than my tangled feet can keep up...

And then he has me "thank you" is all I say to the strongest, safest arms I know. He was there to catch me, he always is. He held me and I steadied myself, shook of the last of the shark infested seaweed and stepped out onto the sand. What surprised me most..? Part of me wanted to go back in...part of me enjoyed it... "what did you enjoy?"

"The being brave, the trying and believing and doing" I remember her but this time she wasn't alone, now she has company, her people, they are there for her and they believe in her...they believe in me.



This is what these past few days have been like trying to finish this thesis...I am not alone, they are here with me, they have me, they believe in me, I belong.

Image 13: Maghery Beach, Co. Donegal. August 2023. Natasha Marron

So now that I am at the end of this thesis, if not this journey, where to now? I'm not seeking a destination, my journey now will be with an awareness of what track I'm on, that is, what story I am telling and whether I need to re-orient, re-story, change the tracks of the dominant story.

Looking back to my research question, I know now that the faith-filled, positive, Story is the story that when dominant works for me. What do I mean by works for me? It feels authentic, not necessarily happy, although there is a better chance of that, but more so that I feels real, it is where I feel I belong. Many of the stories that have presented challenges or difficulties to me in my life, have an undercurrent of exclusion or if not exclusion, then lack of inclusion. The Story, the place in my life where I've felt the greatest sense of belonging has been when I've been open to and engaged with my faith, in the spiritual story. That is not to say that these times were my happiest times, some were but others absolutely were not. I've also learned that trauma, anxiety, or an overwhelming sense of exclusion or powerlessness, especially if it relates to my children, can cause the Story to jump tracks, leaving the faith-filled track, and moving to a grief-fuelled, or battle-ground track and travelling on these tracks has a high cost, higher than I could afford to pay.

Redirecting to the faith filled track, feels secure, soothing, nourishing, energising. The warrior is changed, reborn, an inspired force for good, for me and for others. Thinking also of Hambly (2011), I am excited by her work on looking at prayer, meditation, contemplation both in a spiritual and a secular context. This to me feels inspired and creative, a way to tap in to and work with untold stories.

I've re-awakened and clarified my interest in guidance, my desire to continue to grow and develop and build on my skills and experience here. I have discovered possibilities in merging both storytelling and this faith fuelled Story track with my guidance practice. I am now very aware of the stories I tell, to myself and about myself, this has changed how I am at work and will change how I work. Hearing clients tell their stories, considering where their stories started, what track they are on, that is, what dominant story they tell, and what difference that might make to them in their lives. Finding a way to make enough time for any significant work on stories (Savickas, 2005) could be challenging in the high volume, short appointment, guidance environment in which I currently work. However, awareness of the importance of our stories and tapping into them and the benefit that can bring is a very positive place to move on from. Judging from my experience over the last four years and especially this past year, the idea of changing tracks in our stories has the potential to change a lot in our lives.

To get back to the research question, what is it like to explore my stories in this border country? I can confidently say that Bochner and Ellis (2016 p. 66) were absolutely correct when they said “blood and guts” ... walking through my stories has been and felt exhausting, infuriating, overwhelming, heart-breaking, tear-jerking, muscle-aching, eye-burning, mind-bending, heart-pounding and dance-around-the-room-at-four-in-the-morning-exhilarating. This work, this endeavour, has been many things but never a burden, it has always been and will remain a welcome presence in my conscious and unconscious, and in my heart. I don't want it to end.

And in the end?

Long ago in that distant paradigm where I first encountered research, the format of a thesis was consistent, ending with a Discussion where the old reliable phrase “further research is recommended” would always have a place. In all my travels from that place, I can still say that further research is recommended. I wholeheartedly say this now, because of what this journey, this research, has taught me, shown me, taken from me and given to me. I don't want to leave this “writing life”, this autoethnographic life (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 72) behind.

Part of wrestling with the octopus in this story is that I felt the tentacles of my stories and my thoughts spreading beyond the scope of where I or this research could reach. There are stories to be told in more depth, there are tracks and stories stretching in many directions. As can be seen in the story track, the Heart-land graphic, stories, formed by lived experience, major and minor events, can influence the track, the dominant story. From a career guidance and counselling perspective, there is much more to be made on where this story goes from here. However, for now, for me, the most significant findings and contribution to knowledge of this research is the realisation of the value in the exploration. It took the entirety of this research experience to explore my storied life and to identify my preferred dominant story. To identify where I am in this border country and to even come to the realisation that guidance counselling is an area of work where I still feel skilled, can feel valued, and can be seen and heard. It would be interesting and sustaining for me going forward to continue to explore these tracks into the border country.

Ellis (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016) says that some colleagues would say autoethnography has enhanced if not saved their careers, perhaps even their lives. Earlier in the course, at a group supervision session I heard myself say "... doing this course is saving me." It was very early in the process, there was a lot yet to unfold but I was correct in that assessment. This research, this way of being, is constantly in my head and as the year has gone on, in my writing too. Still as I begin to write, many sessions start with "this is really difficult..." and then it goes on from there. I start with exactly where I am, in the not knowing (McCormack, 2014; Speedy, 2013) and the knowing comes, or it doesn't or something about the not knowing becomes known. Carrying this research, this way of being around in my head, it reminds me of my children. They are never far from my thoughts. Even when they aren't in my consciousness they are there and at any moment can pop to the surface – something they need, I have to do, I should have done, I need to think more about, I might need to think more about... These thoughts, aren't a burden, usually, they are just there. This is my research journey too, always there, not a burden and in an earlier draft I'd written "an empty space when I think of its absence going forward (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016)".

Now, in what feels like a moment of grace, a small transformation with the liminal disposition of this place (McCormack, 2015), a "shift in the borders" of my self-understanding (Tood, 2014, p 232), I realise that it is not the work that I carry around, it is me. I have now created a space, a presence in my consciousness for me. Just as I brought it to the one-couch, and into our family life, this research journey has enabled me to create space for me to see and hear, to care for and minister to Me.

I don't want to leave the border country but is it a case of, like that other often spoken phrase "you can take the girl out of Donegal, but you can't take Donegal out of the girl". Can I keep this border country, can I keep a liminal space, kintsugi, a golden and inspired in-between, on my journey from here. Where might that lead? And what stories might I find there?

As I come to the end of this journey, one phrase comes to mind...

I still have a photograph of me heading off that morning...so I know, more than remember, that I had a little red and white dress, red and white the colours of my hometown, or the town where I grew up. I had long white socks, brown buckle shoes, a little rectangular lunch box with a white handle and a tight grip on my Daddy's hand, as I stood ready to go – on the Main Street, ready to get into his green Hunter car and drive the short drive to school. (I've always wondered why my mother didn't come with me that day.) My mother stayed at home while my Dad brought me on the two-minute drive to school. I don't remember walking in, but I remember the sensory assault of the school yard – kids swirling around me, noisy noise, what was happening here? I don't remember what happened when he left me there, only that I came home for lunch and was distraught at the thought of having to go back for part two of the day. The after-lunch-heading-off photo has a little girl, still in the red dress but now with a red, tear-stained face, holding on to her Dad as he took her back to school alone.

The days didn't get easier, nauseous mornings, alone in noisy noise, too many people, strange smells and a pounding chest. How must it have looked to others, all the teachers sitting together in a line, along the low wall of the yard and one little lost girl beside her teacher at the end of the line, waiting.

Strange I can feel those feeling now as I write this, my heart is beating faster than it would normally, my breathing is shallow, she just wants to be gone from there/ I know what she needs, she wants someone to take her from there and keep her safe.

The walk in each morning had a long walk down the corridor past other classrooms then around a corner and up five steps to my class on the right at the top of the steps. Gradually she found her courage, she started to walk part of the corridor journey by herself, standing on the steps of the stairs, turning and shouting "I like ya, I love ya" over and over to her Dad as he waited and watched her go. Except that

one morning, growing in courage she walked down the corridor, up half the steps, peered around the corner to give the usual goodbye script...and he was gone.

I don't remember if I was in Baby Infants when I had the dream,. I know that it was set in the old school, and I left there after that first year and we moved to the lovely, clean, kind smelling, bright new school for High Infants onwards. In the dream I was walking down the corridor as usual on my way to the corner and the steps but there was no one else around. I felt drawn to stop as I walked down the corridor, and I turned right into the 3rd Class room. There were no desks, no chairs, no people, the room was completely empty except for Him. In the middle of the room there was a large wooden Cross, and there He was, Jesus, on the Cross. I wasn't scared, I knew Him, and I said, "I don't know where to go". He got down from the Cross, held out His Hand and took my hand. He said, "Come with Me, I'll show you". I woke up.

... to be continued



Image 14. Natasha Marron, personal collection.

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Appendix

Spotify Playlist – Natasha: Border Country Stories Soundtrack

Scan the code with phone to open in Spotify



Image 15 Natasha: Border Country Stories Playlist

Lyrics

Note to Self: Randy Houser

Note to self

A truck only goes so far on half a tank
That credit card ain't money in the bank
If it don't sound like a good idea, it probably
ain't

Note to self

You can't change a way, she's gonna
change her mind
She might love you, but she won't like you
all the time

Instead of taking her for granted, take her
somewhere nice

Note to self

Love ain't diamond rings
Bigger don't always mean better
The grass ain't always green
Money don't grow on trees ever
Can't make somebody be made for ya
God ain't going to do the praying for ya
Whiskey's best left up there on the shelf
Note to self

Some girls say goodbye and mean goodbye
It don't mean that she don't hurt and she
don't cry

You're gonna wish she would've when she
tells you she don't wanna fight

Note to self

Love ain't diamond rings
Bigger don't always mean better
The grass ain't always green

Money don't grow on trees ever
Can't make somebody be made for ya
God ain't going to do the praying for ya
Whiskey's best left up there on the shelf
Note to self

I should've kept it in my pocket
I should've known it from the start
I should've read it every morning
Should've wrote it on my heart

Love ain't diamond rings
Bigger don't always mean better
The grass ain't always green
Money don't grow on trees ever
Can't make somebody be made for ya
God ain't going to do the praying for ya
Whiskey's best left up there on the shelf
You're gonna have to find the answers
somewhere else
Note to self

Note to self

A truck only goes so far on half a tank

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Bobby Pinson / Casey Beathard /
Randy Houser / Ross Copperman

Note to Self lyrics © Emi Blackwood Music Inc.,
Sony/atv Tree Publishing, Little Louder Songs,
Seven Ring Circus Songs, Music Of Ctm Outlander
Music Lp., I'm Your Huckleberry Music

Come As You Are: Crowder

Come out of sadness
From wherever you've been
Come broken hearted
Let rescue begin
Come find your mercy
Oh, sinner come kneel
Earth has no sorrow
That heaven can't heal
Earth has no sorrow
That heaven can't heal

So lay down your burdens
Lay down your shame
All who are broken
Lift up your face
Oh, wanderer come home
You're not too far
So lay down your hurt
Lay down your heart
Come as you are

There's hope for the hopeless
And all those who've strayed
Come sit at the table
Come taste the grace
There's rest for the weary
Rest that endures
Earth has no sorrow
That heaven can't cure

So lay down your burdens
Lay down your shame
All who are broken
Lift up your face
Oh, wanderer come home
You're not too far
Lay down your hurt lay down your heart
Come as you are
Come as you are
Fall in his arms
Come as you are
There's joy for the mourning
Oh, sinner be still
Earth has no sorrow
That heaven can't heal
Earth has no sorrow
That heaven can't heal

So lay down your burdens
Lay down your shame
All who are broken
Lift up your face
Oh, wanderer come home
You're not too far
So lay down your hurt
Lay down your heart
Come as you are
Come as you are
Come as you are
Come as you are

Source: [LyricFind](#)

Songwriters: Ben Glover / David Crowder / Matt Maher

Come as You Are lyrics © Capitol CMG Publishing

God is in this Story: Katy Nichole, Big Daddy Weave

There's torn up pages in this book
Words that tell me I'm no good
Chapters that defined me for so long
But the hands of grace and endless love
Dusted off and picked me up
Told my heart that hope is never gone

God is in this story
God is in the details
Even in the broken parts
He holds my heart, He never fails
When I'm at my weakest
I will trust in Jesus
Always in the highs and lows
The One who goes before me
God is in this story

So, if the storm you're walking through
Feels like it's too much and you
Wonder if He even cares at all
Well, hold on tight to what you know
He promised He won't let you go
Your song of healing's written in His scars

God is in this story
God is in the details
Even in the broken parts
He holds my heart, He never fails
When I'm at my weakest
I will trust in Jesus
Always in the highs and lows
The One who goes before me
God is in this story

If it reads like addiction
If it reads like disease

He's the One who frees the prisoner
He's the healer of all things
If it reads like depression
If it reads broken home
He's the One who holds your sorrow
He won't leave you here alone

God is in this story
God is in the details

Even in the broken parts
He holds my heart, He never fails
When I'm at my weakest
I will trust in Jesus
Always in the highs and lows
The One who goes before me
Always in the highs and lows
The One who goes before me
God is in this story (you're in this story)
God is in my story (right here in my story)

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Jeff Pardo / Ethan Gregory Hulse /
Katy Nichole

God Is In This Story lyrics © Universal Music -
Brentwood Benson Songs, Meaux Mercy
Publishing, Be Essential Songs

Goodness of God: Jenn Johnson

I love You, Lord
Oh, your mercy never failed me
All my days, I've been held in your hands
From the moment that i wake up
Until i lay my head
Oh, i will sing of the goodness of God

And all my life you have been faithful
And all my life you have been so, so good
With every breath that i am able
Oh, i will sing of the goodness of God

I love your voice
You have led me through the fire
And in darkest night you are close like no
other
I've known you as a Father
I've known you as a Friend
And i have lived in the goodness of God,
yeah

And all my life you have been faithful, oh-oh-
oh
And all my life you have been so, so good
With every breath that i am able
Oh, i will sing of the goodness of God, yeah

'Cause your goodness is running after, it's
running after me
Your goodness is running after, it's running
after me
With my life laid down, I'm surrendered now
I give you everything
'Cause your goodness is running after, it's
running after me, oh-oh

Cause your goodness is running after, it's
running after me
Your goodness is running after, it's running
after me
With my life laid down, I'm surrendered now
I give you everything
'Cause your goodness is running after, it
keeps running after me

And all my life you have been faithful
And all my life you have been so, so good
With every breath that i am able
Oh, I'm gonna sing of the goodness of God
I'm gonna sing, I'm gonna sing

'Cause all my life you have been faithful
And all my life you have been so, so good
With every breath that i am able
Oh, I'm gonna sing of the goodness of God
Oh, I'm gonna sing of the goodness of God

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Jason David Ingram / Brian Johnson /
Edmond Martin Cash / Benjamin David Fielding /
Jenn Johnson

Goodness of God Lyrics © So Essential Tunes,
Capitol Cmg Paragon, Bethel Music Publishing,
Shout! Music Publishing Australia

I hope you dance: Leanne Womack

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder,
You get your fill to eat but always keep that
hunger,
May you never take one single breath for
granted,
God forbid love ever leave you empty
handed,
I hope you still feel small when you stand
beside the ocean,
Whenever one door closes I hope one more
opens,
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting
chance,
And when you get the choice to sit it out or
dance.

I hope you dance... I hope you dance...

I hope you never fear those mountains in the
distance,
Never settle for the path of least resistance,
Livin' might mean takin' chances, but they're
worth takin',
Lovin' might be a mistake, but it's worth
makin',
Don't let some Hell bent heart leave you
bitter,
When you come close to sellin' out
reconsider,
Give the heavens above more than just a
passing glance,
And when you get the choice to sit it out or
dance.

I hope you dance... I hope you dance.

I hope you dance... I hope you dance.
(Time is a wheel in constant motion always
rolling us along,
Tell me who wants to look back on their
years
and wonder where those years have gone.)

I hope you still feel small when you stand
beside the ocean,
Whenever one door closes I hope one more
opens,
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting
chance,
And when you get the choice to sit it out or
dance.

Dance... I hope you dance.
I hope you dance... I hope you dance.
I hope you dance... I hope you dance.
(Time is a wheel in constant motion always
rolling us along,
Tell me who wants to look back on their
years
and wonder where those years have gone.)

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Mark Daniel Sanders / Tia M. Sillers

I Hope You Dance Lyrics © Universal Music Corp.,
Sony/atv Melody, Choice Is Tragic Music, Soda
Creek Songs, Round Hill Verses Publishing

Happy Girl: Martina McBride

I used to live in a darkened room
Had a face of stone
And a heart of gloom
Lost my hope, I was so far gone
Crying all my tears
With the curtains drawn

I didn't know until my soul broke free
I've got these angels watching over me,
yeah

Oh, watch me go
I'm a happy girl
Everybody knows
That the sweetest thing that you'll ever see
In the whole wide world
Is a happy girl

I used to hide in a party crowd
Bottled up inside
Feeling so left out
Standing in a corner wearing concrete shoes
With my frozen smile
And my lighted fuse

Now every time I start to feel like that
I roll my heart out like a welcome mat

Oh, watch me go
I'm a happy girl
Everybody knows
That the sweetest thing that you'll ever see

In the whole wide world
Is a happy girl

Laugh when I feel like it
Cry when I feel like it
That's just how my life is
That's how it goes

Oh, watch me go
I'm a happy girl
And I've come to know
That the world won't change
Just 'cause I complain
Let the axis twirl
I'm a happy girl

Oh, watch me go
I'm a happy girl
Everybody knows
That the sweetest thing that you'll ever see
In the whole wide world
Is a happy girl

Oh, yeah oh, yeah
I'm a happy girl

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Annie Leslie Roboff / Beth Nielsen
Chapman

Happy Girl lyrics © Almo Music Corp., Bughouse

Brothers in Arms: Dire Straits

These mist covered mountains
Are a home now for me
But my home is the lowlands
And always will be
Someday you'll return to
Your valleys and your farms
And you'll no longer burn to be
Brothers in arms

Through these fields of destruction
Baptisms of fire
I've witnessed your suffering
As the battle raged high
And though they did hurt me so bad
In the fear and alarm
You did not desert me
My brothers in arms

There's so many different worlds
So many different suns
And we have just one world
But we live in different ones

Now the sun's gone to hell and
The moon's riding high
Let me bid you farewell
Every man has to die
But it's written in the starlight
And every line in your palm
We're fools to make war
On our brothers in arms

Source: [LyricFind](#)

Songwriters: Mark Knopfler

Brothers in Arms lyrics © Universal Music
Publishing Group

Evidence: Josh Baldwin

All throughout my history
Your faithfulness has walked beside me
The winter storms made way for spring
In every season, from where I'm standing

I see the evidence of Your goodness
All over my life, all over my life
I see Your promises in fulfilment
All over my life, all over my life

Help me remember when I'm weak
Fear may come, but fear will leave
You lead my heart to victory
You are my strength, and You always will be

I see the evidence of Your goodness
All over my life, all over my life
I see Your promises in fulfilment
All over my life, all over my life

See the cross, the empty grave
The evidence is endless
All my sin rolled away
Because of You, oh, Jesus
See the cross, the empty grave
The evidence is endless
All my sin rolled away
Because of You, oh, Jesus

I see the evidence of Your goodness
All over my life, all over my life
I see Your promises in fulfilment
All over my life, all over my life, yeah
I see the evidence of Your goodness (when I
wake up in the morning)
All over my life (I see Your mercies are new)
All over my life (yeah, You're all around us)
I see Your promises in fulfilment
All over my life, all over my life (yeah, You're
all around us) So why should I fear?
The evidence is here
Why should I fear?
Oh, the evidence is here

Source: [LyricFind](#) Songwriters: Ed Cash / Ethan
Hulse / Josh Baldwin

Evidence lyrics © Bethel Music Publishing, Capitol
CMG Publishing, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC,
Universal Music Publishing Group

